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GRADUATE COLLEGE

ART, AUTONOMY, AND COMMUNITY

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

KAREN L. MIZELL

Norman, Oklahoma

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ART, AUTONOMY, AND COMMUNITY

A dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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In concert with the argument that I trace in the following pages, just as art and autonomy are products of the human community, so this dissertation is the product of a community of people who include my friends, my mentors, and my family. Just as the human community figures into the constitution of the individual, so does the more limited community comprised of these individuals figure into my identity, and in so many ways, they have graced my life. In ways I find humbling and ennobling, my many friends and family members have encouraged and supported me as I followed my quest.

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guidance, and vision (and patience) on this project.

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Happily for me, I do not see the end of this project as a destination, but as a milestone, the beginning of a marvelous and exciting adventure and opportunity to place myself in a position to serve my fellow beings.

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Karen Mizell
Dr. Edward Sankowski, Dissertation Chair

Art, Autonomy, and Community
Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation represents an investigation of the interlock between art and autonomy beginning with a general discussion about the uses of the terms, 'art' and 'autonomy'. I investigate various contemporary views about human freedom and autonomy and advance the view that art enhances human autonomy through the vehicle of imagination, a theme developed by Kant. My contention is that sometimes an artwork expresses something especially meaningful, such as a belief or value, that moves or touches the spectator in a way that no other medium can. Often our cultural, institutional, social, and political preconceptions color our background beliefs and expectations about our lives, our relationships, and our environment. These beliefs and expectations sometimes blind us to concepts, attitudes, principles, or beliefs that we take for granted but which we should not accept as a society, or as members of a society, and might not accept if we were consciously aware of them. Many of these institutionalized practices limit human possibility, and by extension autonomy. It is often through art that we are able to articulate these background beliefs and practices, to view the world through the lens of a paradigm other than one to which we are accustomed. One of the most intriguing aspects of this investigation is the extent to which art functions as a social connective, bridging time and culture, enabling human beings to both discover themselves and to master their realities. Art allows us to articulate our human possibilities, most importantly, to connect to other human beings, and develop our capacities to live autonomous lives.

Chapter 1

Art and Autonomy

This study of the interrelation between art and autonomy emphasizes the social context in which we humans engage in certain enterprises. By way of beginning, in the following pages I propose to outline the relationship between art and autonomy, in particular to present a generalized discussion of the way we use the terms 'art' and 'autonomy'. We will note various philosophical views about art, as well as various contemporary views about human freedom and autonomy.

The fundamental problem I approach in the following pages is to identify the connection between art and human autonomy. I believe art enhances human autonomy through the vehicle of imagination. My view involves the contention that sometimes an artwork expresses something especially meaningful, such as a belief or value, that moves or touches the spectator in a way that no other medium can. My argument is grounded on a view that cultural, institutional, social, and political preconceptions color our expectations about life, relationships, and our environment. Often these expectations blind us to concepts, attitudes, principles, or beliefs that we take for granted but which we should not accept as a society, and would not accept if we were consciously aware of them. Sometimes accepted practices or attitudes in a society are not examined by its members; indeed it would be impossible to examine every belief. Nevertheless, many of these beliefs and assumptions which are never articulated form the background beliefs of our lives.

My use of the term 'autonomy' is broader than conventional uses of the term by moral philosophers. Like most moral philosophers, I use 'autonomy' to roughly mean self-regulated human action, but I go further to use it in a nontraditional sense in connection with the social and political environment. That is, if art makes conscious some of the hidden assumptions embedded in our cultural and social traditions, and makes it possible for us to examine and change those assumptions, then it also enhances our ability to actualize our view of human possibility as self-regulating, self-governing individuals.

Art provides a way for us to examine our paradigmatic ideas and preconceptions by bringing them to light through imagination, through Wittgenstein's 'as if,' or as Kendall Walton says, through make-believe, rendering them open for conscious examination. Many of our institutionalized practices and assumptions limit human possibility, and autonomy. We know that scientific and technological advances change our views about the scope of human possibility and generate social changes along with changes in the parameters of human existence. Art often gives us such a vision of human and social possibility before those possibilities are ever actualized. Just as mathematicians postulate imaginary entities and then go on to do proofs about them, art postulates, by way of imagination, ways of social and human well-being that can then be socially and individually realized. Such advances contribute to human flourishing and also, as I propose, to autonomy.

A definition of art, or a discursion into the nature of art is an intimidating, and possibly, futile exercise. Historically, Western philosophy has been more concerned with beauty than with art, as we see in Socrates' discussion of beauty in the *Symposium* as a spiritual reality that is reflected in human beings and material things. Aristotle establishes another historical tradition by equating beauty with order in his *Poetics*. Controversies about the subjective or objective nature of beauty were fueled by David Hume's position that aesthetic value is an emotional response. Kant and Nietzsche advanced the philosophical notion that categories other than Beauty may spark aesthetic interest.

Philosophical inquiries into the nature of art have variously speculated that art is essentially mimetic, representational, emotional or expressive. Other views include formalist as opposed to instrumental accounts. The nineteenth century saw dialectical, intuitionist, and organicist accounts of the nature of art. The twentieth century has been particularly fruitful with new versions of the dialectical account along with an institutional account and a corresponding procedural account.

To confuse the issue even more, some philosophers contend that works of art are individuated by their media, while others focus on the textual nature of art and the translatability of texts among various available media. Recent views of art in Western philosophy tend to emphasize the nonfunctional aspects of art, although it seems vacuous to say that a thing is a work of art just by virtue of its lack of function. This dispute accounts for the classification of architecture as art and non-art at various times in art

history. Other positions, not necessarily distinct from the ones I have already listed, take a functional approach and focus on the religious, political, historical, and social function of art. It seems that it is reckless, risky in the extreme to attempt a generic definition of art.¹

What does seem uncontroversial is that art is an artifact that somehow "brackets" experience. Moreover, it is not so much an end as a process, a way of experience. This description allows the artworld to include things such as Rembrandt's paintings, Duchamp's ready-mades, the Kilasanatha Temple in India, and "happenings" such as the orchestrated flying of kites in Sacramento, California. Timothy Binkley says,

when Rauschenberg erased the De Kooning, it was not the work (the labor) they did which made the art. A work of art is not necessarily something worked on; it is basically something conceived. To be an artist is not always to make something, but rather to engage in a cultural enterprise in which artistic pieces are proffered for consideration....²

Perhaps we can say that art is an artifact that is endowed with aesthetic value. It transforms experience and that transformation is universal. Universal, because it may be accessed by all humans, but it is nevertheless a unique articulation of experience. To say that art is intuitionist, or institutional, and so on, is to ignore many aspects of art that

¹ Melvin Rader and Bertram Jessup. *Art and Human Values* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976) 124-125. Thomas Munro. *The Arts and Their Interrelations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1949) 543.

² Timothy Binkley, "Peirce: Contra Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35.3 (1977) 265-277.

distinguish it from other human enterprises. It may be that art is a distinct kind of activity rather than a distinguishable product. We might say that art is a process that brings a dimension to human experience that is not accessible through ordinary human pursuits. Art may be a kind of knowing that liberates us from the mundane and elevates us to higher levels of experience.

It also seems that art has a uniquely social function. All arguments about how individuals create art and the social place of art aside, in every epoch, art is socially defined and integrated. Just as in scientific developments, certain developments in art can occur only when the social climate permits. Art as both ontological object and functional object, often goes beyond the strictly aesthetic. I wish to examine one aspect of this non-aesthetic value that derives from aesthetic value. The institutional value of art lies beyond its capacity to mimic, or reproduce, or express experience because it encodes human experience in such a way that generations of participants have access to the nuances of that experience that would otherwise be unavailable to them. We may find that an implication of this view will be that art allows us to see the world through the lens of a paradigm different from our own.

It is clear, from any overview of the history of a philosophy of art, that there are philosophers and psychologists, who attack art. There are others who praise it. Sometimes the same philosopher does both, as when Tolstoy expresses the views of so-called Christian Communists saying that art is limited to those artifacts that both honor the

fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.³ In effect, it isn't art if it doesn't fulfill both demands. But, Tolstoy also thinks beauty may be symptomatic of the evil in art since it expresses the gratification of the senses and panders to unjust and irreligious sentiments.

When investigating the ontological place of art, other philosophers as diverse as John Dewey, Plato, and Aristotle believe that art has moral, social, and political implications. Plato, of course, takes the strongly negative stand that since art is but an imitation of the imitation of the real world, it is antithetical to the pursuit of truth. It seduces the beholder to pursue the vulgar instead of the more noble occupation, which is the pursuit of truth. Dewey takes the opposite, but extreme view, arguing that even the most ordinary of objects that surround us in everyday life are imbued with aesthetic value. It does not require much of a cognitive stretch when he extends his thesis to say that ordinary experience is aesthetic experience if only we attune ourselves to a holistic and uninhibited range of apprehension and perception of the world. This means that moral experience has aesthetic undertones, as does political and social experience. Aristotle takes a moderate approach: art is not to be spurned, but he acknowledges its social volatility, capable of pushing the beholder to the outer limits of joy or despair. As the beholder approaches these emotional limits, he is purged of unruly emotions, which makes him more fit for human society.

³ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* Ed. W. Gareth Jones. Trans. A. Maude. (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1994)

Kant holds art in such esteem that he renders aesthetic apprehension inert, void of desire and base passions. But he tethers the aesthetic imagination to the moral, linking it, however, tenuously to the world of human action. Danto more directly endorses the view that art is a force for change in the social *status quo* and that it may also initiate the overturn of some prevailing state of affairs. Indeed, it is precisely this potency of art, says Danto, that leads thinkers and apologists for the *status quo* to emasculate art by conferring only intrinsic value, which is the philosophical ground of the slogan "art for art's sake".

If we are persuaded that art appeals only to the aesthetic taste and lacks the capacity to change or affect the course of human events, we reify art, giving it a noble status, but we also cripple it.

There are two distinct points of analytical departure when we engage an investigation into art. One has to do with the status of art, or with the status of a particular work; in short, an ontological analysis of art. The other has to do with the question about the efficacy of art, its function. Nelson Goodman considers the latter to be "...the matter of primary and peculiar concern".⁴ That is my position also, that the function of art, more than its ontology, is worth our critical concern because of its vigor and its ability to persuade participants to choose one course of action over another.

This is not to say that ontological investigations are not philosophically defensible or important. Nor are the questions entirely distinct. It is not clear why "The Rembrandt

⁴ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.), 70.

painting remains a work of art, as it remains a painting, while functioning only as a blanket; nor why the stone from the driveway may not strictly become art by functioning as art."⁵ Art is multifunctional, but the real force of art rests in its ability to expand our individual visions of human possibility. The implication of this claim, if correct, reinforces the claims of the two great pessimists about art, Freud and Plato. Freud's contempt for art is couched in his view that the function of art is to provide an escape from "reality." Art alienates the beholder from the actual. Freud draws parallels between the purpose of art and the purpose of neurosis. Indeed, neurosis is the lesser of the two evils because it simply rests on a denial of reality. Art, on the other hand, is insanity because its ground is in substitution for reality.

I am inclined to hold a more favorable view of art, somewhat akin to the views of Nelson Goodman and Herbert Marcuse (which is not to say their views are similar). The framework of these theories is unmistakably like that of Freud's, and to a lesser degree, Plato's.

There is a great deal of difference between making it a criterion of art that it further the human good, or contribute to human flourishing and making it a criterion that it have no instrumental use at all. I am also not suggesting here that art must be viewed instrumentally, so that it is valued insofar as it does contribute in a positive manner to the human condition. This is a view taken by various groups, including John Ruskin, who

⁵ Goodman, 60.

believed that art has three functions: to enforce religious sentiment, to perfect one's ethical state, and to do material service.⁶ It seems clear that some forms of art contribute to the quality of human existence. They give zest to our language, interest to our leisure, order to our movements, and voice to our innermost aspirations. Although the work of art is not a copy of nature, the artist draws his data from nature and presents his images in the familiar and available forms he sees around him.

A great deal of space in the literature of aesthetics is given over to the individuation of art from ordinary experience. Those who hold this view think art is a form of human expression that isolates us from the real world around us. So, we find art ensconced or performed in great museums, theaters, and concert halls, isolated from the comings and goings of ordinary human existence. In such gracious surroundings we are given distilled interpretations of events and imaginings of various artists through their individual expressions, which we then enjoy subjectively.

The great irony is that art is nothing less and nothing more than a political and social construct invested with ideology, but sanctified and abstracted by established ideologies of art in such a way that its expression is camouflaged by this effort to isolate art from the rest of life.⁷ This is especially true with interpretations of art that reinforce the illusion that art somehow transcends ordinary experience because of its aesthetic

⁶ John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*. (New York: Marnard, Merrill & Co., 1893).

⁷ Cf. Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Chapter 1. A similar theory is also held by Plato concerning the political import of art.

significance, because of its ability to record and perpetuate pristine abstract values and truths. What such interpretations of art do, however, is to protect and perpetuate ideologically social and political tendencies, as for example, the subjugation and mistreatment of some groups of people at the hands of others, or to substantiate questionable social and political practices and the authority that enforces those practices. Art is unquestionably a vehicle of social and political authority capable of depriving people of their autonomy by reinforcing social and political practices that rob them of their ability to self-legislate and govern themselves, that validates the authority of established institutions, institutions that often define a culture and a civilization. In short, art often functions as propaganda for those who stand to gain from social and political *status quo*.

On the other hand, just as art may express an agenda that hampers individual autonomy, it may also express shared historical experiences, giving form to real feelings and beliefs that contend for conscious and collective expression. Art may express sentiments that challenge and subvert ideologically enforced illusions about society and culture. Furthermore, artistic imagination may lead the participant to question values that are not altogether beneficial to social order and progress and that impose on us values that oppress the disenfranchised and the voiceless in a society. Thus, it gives voice to the mute and power to the powerless. Art is a vehicle by which we may glimpse the hidden

authority that guides social custom and law and that illegitimately guides individual consciousness and behavior and hampers autonomous expression of existence.

In philosophical literature, "autonomy" is a term that suffers both from frequent use and ambiguity of meaning. One finds assertions that certain disciplines such as art history or the history of architecture have claim to conceptual autonomy from a general view of history. Or, one finds reference to the "autonomy" of certain works of art with regard to critical interpretation, or their relationships to other works produced by an artist, or as representatives of a certain stylistic period. In terms of personal, human freedom, autonomy is a term that Kant and other philosophers use to express a highly technical and, often, arcane feature of rational personhood. Use of the term is embedded in moral, political, and social states of affairs, any of which casts its shadow on the perception of autonomy. More recent philosophical literature introduces 'autonomy' in order to navigate the narrow distinction between freedom and liberty, or perhaps, some combination of the two.

I wish to investigate various views about human autonomy and to consider the intertwining of autonomy with the creation of and experience of art. Since much of this discussion involves at least implicit views about the values and projects an individual holds dear, I will also briefly discuss prevailing views about the relationship between autonomy and morality.

Isaiah Berlin develops a dual notion of liberty based on a controversial distinction between negative liberty and positive liberty.⁸ I examine his discussion first, not because it is the most definitive discussion of liberty, or the most satisfying. Berlin's discussion of positive and negative freedom, while misleading, accomplishes three things relevant to the view about autonomy I try to develop: it firmly anchors the conception of autonomy in the social and political context, it brings to light differences in political ideology when the distinction is applied, and it also develops certain criteria for a workable conception of autonomy. Above all, Berlin's discussion develops the concept of autonomy as an ethical position with social and political implications.

Berlin sees coercion and obedience as central notions of politics that are intelligible only in the broad context of social issues. Political institutions are grounded on certain levels of obedience and coercion, with the protection of individual privacy and the constitution of public authority an issue in theories of autonomy. In particular, freedom for some often depends upon the restraint of others. Berlin acknowledges that the conceptions of freedom that we have are relative to our conception of persons and draws a distinction between the 'rational' and the 'irrational' self. He sees the 'rational' self as a social or collective aspect of the self which, it is sometimes thought, wills the individual to achieve a higher level of freedom. In terms of what Berlin calls 'positive freedom,' the irrational self is that part of a person driven by desires and emotions; it is that part of a

⁸ Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 118-172.

person that strives for rationality and completeness, but in so doing, risks a loss of personal identity and the subjugation of part of the self.

In this light, we see that there are two political senses of "freedom," the negative and the positive. Negative freedom has to do with the deliverance of an individual from restraint or compulsion by others, whether individuals or institutions. Positive freedom is the freedom an individual has to regulate or control the course of his or her life. One implication of positive liberty is the power to choose what one wishes to say, do, believe, or support. Positive liberty can be assessed in response to the question: "By whom am I ruled?"⁹ Positive freedom is directed at the nature of individual freedom within society, the areas of life that manifest this freedom, and the source of control. It derives, then, from the desire for self-mastery. Given this description, positive freedom is a feature of individual autonomy, if we take 'autonomous' to roughly designate a self-directing or self-regulating individual. Self-mastery is inherent to positive liberty. But, in practice, for the rational person, positive liberty amounts to even more, it is self-empowering. Berlin refers to this feature when he writes:

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer—deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or

⁹ Berlin, 130.

by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them. This is at least part of what I mean when I say that I am rational, and that it is my reason that distinguishes me as a human being from the rest of the world. I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. I feel free to the degree that I believe this to be true, and enslaved to the degree that I am made to realize that it is not.¹⁰

Berlin, then recognizes a connection between positive liberty and rationality; a connection which, we will find, must be addressed in an investigation of autonomy as well. By nature, rationality is self-empowering, but on the rationalist view, rationality is not an innate characteristic of human beings. Insofar as a person is rational, she will not deny truth, whether political or moral. But rationality is a function of education on this view, for those who are uneducated are somehow less than rational and must be subjected to the rationalizing influence of education and instruction from those who are educated, the rational intelligentsia. Rationality is not a natural human state, it is taught and learned. The natural person, according to such rationalists, must be subordinated to the laws of reason, immutable and discoverable by foolproof scientific methods and, surely, this is the path to true freedom.

The result of this approach is a slippery-slope to a kind of rational despotism, however benign, where the individual does not follow his own "inner light," but achieves

¹⁰ Berlin, 131.

a rational state in virtue of his latent rational will and the guidance and direction from those who have realized their rational potential. It is the initiates to rationality who decide for him how he is to achieve rational self-direction, which conforms to the rationality of others because all humans instantiate the laws of rationality through their rational faculties. This leads to a paradox that drives theories of self-realization. If something is good for me, then if someone makes me achieve it, then I am not being coerced, because I have willed it whether I know it or not. I am truly free even though my empirical self rejects this freedom.

An interesting feature of this characterization is that it is like Kant's in the sense that certain traits of character and minimal rationality are necessary features of the autonomous individual. The degree of positive freedom enjoyed by an individual is relative to the perception of himself as a responsible, self-regulating agent, which involves a relationship between human desire and freedom. Control of some of one's desires increases the agent's freedom and conversely, lack of control of desire severely limits freedom.

The caution here is to determine exactly which desires are intended, since some desires influence the development of autonomous individuals, such as: the desire for self-regulation, the desire for the development of some degree of rationality, or the desire for equality, and so on. It appears that some control must be exerted over base desires and

passions, since on this account, some desires are constituent to being a self, particularly an autonomous self and others are not.

Negative freedom is a function of the degree of control exercised by sources external to the individual. Berlin casts negative freedom as a necessary condition for freedom rather than freedom itself. While negative and positive freedom are distinct ends, with positive freedom conceptually associated with autonomy, negative freedom does make essential contributions to individual autonomy, in my own view. Negative freedom is traditionally thought to be freedom from interference in one's liberties. Specifically, it has to do with a basic notion about individual rights within political institutions. It is clear that the freedom of some must be limited in the interest of other principles governing political interactions, but it is not clear just what the practical application of negative freedom is because no universal criterion exists for adjudicating between the demands of individual freedom and the demands imposed by other principles, such as the demands of justice which entitle the individual to a minimum of freedom and restrains others from depriving her of it.

We can see that my characterization of liberty renders neither positive nor negative descriptions taken alone, sufficient for full autonomy. Positive freedom comes closest to the view of autonomy that I hope to develop. Yet, without some conception of negative freedom, such as limits on political authority and limits on the manipulation of individuals by outside agents, autonomy, in its fullest sense, is not possible.

On some views, the noumenal self is the source of real autonomy. Just how this self functions is unclear. The implication is that real autonomy has to do with individual self-control generated by some transcendent level of the self. The result, as we have seen, is that certain values can be legitimately imposed on behalf of an individual's rational will. The problem with this characterization is that it over-rationalizes autonomy as an expression of enlightened self-direction, a criticism we can also lodge against Kant, as we shall see in the following pages. Certain parts of the self such as the emotions, and instinctual drives characteristic of the fully developed human are sacrificed to a kind of "hyper-rationality." It is plausible that the autonomous individual need not surrender her emotions and instincts completely to rational control. Some emotional and instinctual drives seem to play a role in legitimate exercises of autonomy.

The distinction between the two kinds of freedom, admittedly, is a somewhat superficial one, since some features of both kinds of freedom must be embedded in the institutional structure of society in order to provide conditions for individual autonomy. For example, there must be some place for negative liberty in society as a qualification for individual autonomy, as in Mill's proviso that proscribes the state from interfering in an individual's behavior if not harming others; as part of this, the individual is protected from undue supervision by the State. On the other hand, positive freedom may be encouraged by the state insofar as it encourages the individual to act in her own self-interest. The bias toward either one of the freedoms may be predicated on a view of what it is to be human,

to be a person. Yet, it may be more productive to view positive and negative freedom as two aspects of the same concept.

Individual autonomy is also a function of other social needs. The desire for individual freedom varies with relation to circumstantial conditions. For example, individuals who are illiterate, hungry, or homeless may value freedom less than other social goods. In cases such as these, legal and political authority that satisfies basic needs may promote human freedom rather than limit it. Perhaps, in an ideal sense, autonomy stands in some sort of semantic and ontological relation to authority, particularly authority over one's self. Negative freedom does not appear to bear any necessary connection to a democratic state, since the **source, or nature,** of political control is extraneous.¹¹ Severe limits were placed on individual freedom in ancient Athens (particularly with respect to women and slaves) even though it stands, at least nominally, as an early example of the Greek democratic city-state. Negative freedom has to do with minimal levels of external control, such as, for example, freedom from coercion, and not with the nature of political control, although Kant thinks political and judicial compulsion does play some role in an individual's external freedom.

Autonomy is not only a moral and political ideal, but a social one as well. In a moral sense, discussions about autonomy focus on the capacity or necessity for individuals to will or submit to some moral code. In this social sense, autonomy is not just the desire

¹¹ Berlin concurs with this view.

for freedom. It is also the need that we have, as rational individuals, for others to recognize our humanity, our rationality, our individuality, and our rightful personhood. It involves a notion of the person as independent of at least some forms of manipulation and coercion while maintaining a capacity for self-determination.

Autonomy involves the psychological fact that humans strive for respect. Berlin talks about it as a desire for status, understanding, and cohesion.¹² On my reading, this craving for status is a manifestation of the human desire to be recognized as individual agent, the validation of the *cogito*.¹³ I realize my discussion of this aspect of autonomy is limited, but for our purposes, we can think of this drive for respect that is a property of human psychology as the social sense of autonomy. It is a function of the values, attitudes, beliefs, and institutions of a society, all of which are in turn affected by collective social forces. The latter are paradigmatic forces that shape our view of autonomy and the autonomous individual, resistant to inflection or change.

Gerald Dworkin expresses a similar view when discussing moral autonomy, saying: "A central feature of moral principles is their social character."¹⁴ He elaborates this point by noting the dependence of moral interpretations upon tradition. Elsewhere, he discusses

¹² Berlin, 158.

¹³ v. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), 120-121 and 336-337.

¹⁴ Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 36.

the claim that one's moral principles are one's own, not in the sense that one creates or invents one's own morals, but in the sense that one somehow, in a nontrivial way, rationally chooses to incorporate certain given moral principles as guiding principles in one's life. This doesn't always take place as a conscious decision. In fact, it more often takes place as an attempt to construct a moral framework for oneself that avoids perceived inconsistencies in an established moral framework.¹⁵

The moral framework is one that is given by way of our social and cultural history. The moral influences into which we are born are ineluctable. They are the complex interrelation of heritage, climate, and environment into which we are born and that influence, for good or ill, our lives and the lives of our communities. We are further subject to social forces exercised and received unknowingly as we are brought into human communities made up of families, friends, classes and various social, political, and moral institutions. Given these factors, it makes no logical, empirical, or conceptual sense to claim that we are capable of inventing our own moral law, any more than we are capable of inventing gravity.¹⁶

A primary function of moral practice, then, is to harmonize human society. Morals facilitate our ability to function socially, to interrelate as individuals. Morality is the vehicle by which natural, social antagonisms may be lessened and contractarian solutions

¹⁵ Cf. Dworkin, 37.

¹⁶ v. Dworkin, 15.

offered in the case of problems generated by mutually intrusive behaviors. As individuals, we make and acknowledge claims upon one another and develop expectations about our common behaviors. Moral law serves to institutionalize the claims we have upon one another and our expectations about behaviors. Hence, morals are essentially social because they make a claim upon the individual and provide criteria for assessing the merit of individual behaviors, deriving their authority from the shared or "internal" aspect.¹⁷ This is not to say that morals guide our actions only when others are part of our environment. Some of our moral actions are natural expressions of our drive to govern and regulate ourselves. For example, if one were the only survivor of a shipwreck and landed on a remote, unpopulated island, and truly subscribed to a moral agenda, she would not commit wanton moral transgressions, even in the absence of a community of other moral beings. Nevertheless, in ordinary societies, any individual who extracts himself from moral demands also severs himself from the social commerce of the community. Adequate descriptions of the nature of autonomy require us to conceptually place the autonomous individual within a pre-existing social, moral, and political framework. Autonomy is not a characteristic of a presocial or premoral state of being.

Similarly, whenever we encounter a work of art, we behold an object that is the repository of centuries of human progress as well as a history of different ways human beings have apprehended the world and expressed these apprehensions. A social

¹⁷ Dworkin, 36.

institution, art is symptomatic of the complexity and interplay of forces and drives that constitute human society. Human society is, at least partially, driven by social and institutional forces that establish norms of behavior for each member of that society. Perhaps more insidiously, these social and institutional forces create ideological paradigms that color the perception of the world subscribed to without question by a society, culture, gender, class or race of people, to the exclusion of other possible, rational views.¹⁸ That we view the world paradigmatically becomes obvious when we confront persons of other cultures or faiths or traditions.

Less obvious are the underlying assumptions and presuppositions constituting prevailing paradigms that ought to be subject to challenge and change, but, too often, elude our critical understanding just because they are so much the fabric of our everyday lives. Besides being difficult to detect, these assumptions and presuppositions, both expressed and unexpressed, are rigid and impervious to change. They minimize the individual and subject him to social and institutional expectations of behavior.

In a certain sense, art functions as a replacement for reality, just as Freud suspected, but not in a way that may be construed as an expression of neurosis or

¹⁸ I use 'paradigm' in a broad, rather than a narrow sense. In a broad sense, the word means a way of seeing the world that is based upon custom, tradition, world-view, and such. In a narrow sense, it means a scientifically based view. Thus, for example, a broad use of the word may lead us to say that persons of different cultures, such as Northern Europeans and American Indians hold differing paradigms about the world, partly because of opposing views about the nature of private property, but also for many other institutionally shaped reasons.

psychosis. By way of symbolism and imagination, it expands our vision of human possibility. When, through art in virtue of imagination, we expand our vision of possibility, we are also able to see beyond our paradigmatic restraints, beyond the limitation imposed on us by society, institutions, other individuals, and most importantly, ourselves.

Art is able to challenge and alter the assumptions and presuppositions inherent in prevailing paradigms despite their rigidity. This, too, is a point I hope to argue in the following pages. One of the dangers posed by such paradigmatic underpinnings has to do with the fact that they subject and minimize the individual. The individual becomes subservient to the accepted practices and institutions of a society. Before we can change these elements we have to apprehend them and we must be able to apprehend possibilities relevant to the present human and individual condition.

Humanizing institutions and societies involves capturing abstract ideals and principles and, by way of imagination and a view of the possible, personalizing these institutions and societies in order for the individual to use them to enrich his experience. Art can not only serve to challenge that which is negative or antithetical to the forces that humanize and civilize us; it provides a way for humans to make a place for themselves in the world. To build a cultural and social world that is hospitable to human freedom, individuals must be able to assimilate the prevailing paradigm. This means that, on a personal and individual level, a person must be able to find for himself the answers to

pressing questions, to find the "fit" between his beliefs and the world as it is given to him socially. When we expand the view of our own possibilities, we are more open to a self-determined future.

We have probably all experienced at least a version of this liberating experience as we read the great myths as children, or even any of the many fairy tales that populate our literary culture. For example, the story of "Hansel and Gretel" involves the separation of two children from their parents. Perhaps as children, we harbored an unexpressed fear of being lost or of losing track of our parents. A reading of this story might have led us to identify with the plight of Hansel and Gretel and, as a result, draw on our internal resources as we recognize our ability to face challenges on our own. One of the points I hope to argue is that art is the vehicle most adapted to "knocking" on the gates of possibility just because it can then "overlay" reality with a "virtual reality" construed by imagination and possibility.

The point of all this talk of possibility and imagination and social paradigms is to trace the connection between art and human autonomy. Art is a social institution that is unique in its ability to probe the hidden assumptions and convictions of prevailing paradigms. It is by way of *status quo*-preserving paradigms that humans, too often, are locked into certain approved modes of behaving, believing, aspiring, and thinking. Even our most personal beliefs about ourselves are paradigmatically directed. We know, from nothing more than a casual glance at cultures and historical epochs, that paradigms do

shift, although they obstinately resist shifting, that ways of believing and apprehending the world change over time and over societies. Elements of these paradigms often stifle human energies, human relationships, human attitudes, and human beliefs, even while they sometimes lift, encourage, and empower us. Because art can be used to probe the hidden framework of paradigmatic beliefs, it can also throw some of these beliefs into relief so that we may regard and evaluate them. Often, when "light is shone" on these beliefs, they are seen to be useless, dehumanizing, unjust, or somehow in violation of important first-order principles; hence these beliefs warrant change and adjustments. At the risk of oversimplifying a delicate, finely tuned social and psychological process, I hope to describe and to argue that one desirable function of art is just to mask reality, to enclose us in a virtual reality by employing the mechanism of possibility and, thereby, to give us an inkling of our more autonomous selves.

Autonomy, as I use it, is distinct from ordinary social and political freedom. Yet, it is a feature of the production and experience of art. It is a self-directing freedom and a state of moral and social independence, and most importantly, interdependence. Educators, philosophers, and artists often hold some view about the connection between social or political freedom and art. The weak version of the thesis is that the creation and observation of art thrives in an open and democratic society. An extreme version of this

view is that art is impossible in a society without political freedom. Proponents of this view claim that art is, in some way, a necessary component of political freedom.¹⁹

This is not to say that political freedom and aesthetic freedom are synonymous. Aesthetic freedom is freedom in the creation and appreciation of art and is often viewed as a necessary element of the experience of art. Kant offers a version of the theory in the *Critique of Pure Judgement* with his claim that beauty is evidence of the noumenal world. In this sense, aesthetic freedom is not the absence of external, physical, or societal restraints. Rather, it is a version of the very human ability to rise among the limitations imposed upon us by everyday life and assert our inner freedom. It is a correlate of our religious, intellectual, and moral freedoms.

Because aesthetic freedom can exist under diverse forms of social order, we see that this is a freedom dependent not upon circumstances, but on the "freedom to express some idea and some feeling in an artistic manner, and to practice the techniques necessary to such expression."²⁰ It is a freedom from internal constraint, even self-subjugation, and finds highest expression in fine art. While many values may be expressed as we create and appreciate art, all are ancillary to and not definitive of art. Jessup and Rader write:

Art is free and self-expressive. It is concerned in its way to present all that life in its full qualitative immediacy is and can be. And its way is simply to express--not to explain,

¹⁹ Cf. Melvin Rader and Bertram Jessup, *Art and Human Values* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), 334.

²⁰ Rader and Jessup, 337.

not to condemn, not to justify. In art, the human spirit is self-expressive—that is all and that is enough. Even when life is grim, the effect of this expression is to liberate.²¹

There is no necessary correlation, then, between a political or social state of affairs and an artistic creation. The artist may live in a society characterized by political and social repression, yet produce art that lends itself to the view that there is much about our world that is altogether pleasing and satisfying. On the other hand, the artist may live in a free, democratic political and social environment, yet produce art that indicts some repressive feature of the world. One of the many functions of art is a normative one, just because it presents a view of some aspect of the world as it could be. Art, by nature, resists the complete assimilation of reality. Through art, we are able to grasp the gap between reality and value, the distance between truth and perception, and the separation between the ideal world and the real world.

As we have seen, autonomy is closely connected to the distinction Isaiah Berlin makes between negative and positive aspects of freedom. The ideal of human autonomy is more than the external lack of constraint, compulsion, or control. Rather, autonomy entails the internal capacity of human beings to understand and accept the necessary workings of the world around, yet resist passive acceptance of those limitations in favor of active participation. To be autonomous is to be engaged in a world that is not of one's making, yet to engage it as an internally free, self-determined individual.

²¹ Rader and Jessup, 339.

Art expresses that which is uniquely human, but paradoxically, it accomplishes this by liberating the individual from the practical context and transferring individual experience, by way of imagination and possibility, to the objective domain about which I will have more to say later. It is precisely this capacity to isolate certain experiences from the practical context, and to pay attention to internal relationships and intrinsic qualities that makes aesthetic experiences possible. Because aesthetic experiences, particularly those associated with fine art, isolate some aspect of human experience and express it in all its immediacy, without apology or excuse, some art enables the participant, whether artist or beholder, to transcend her immediacy and to comprehend human self-expression without the distortion of egoism and self-concern. The subjective becomes objective, and what is objective is something that can be addressed and confronted.

Theorists' views about art are largely determined by their underlying concepts of art as product-oriented, artist-oriented, audience-oriented, or utilitarian in nature. A philosophy of art, then, may establish the work, the creator, the audience, or the effects of the work as the theoretical locus of art. What this means is that some theorists concentrate on intrinsic aspects of the artwork, and think it sullies the study of the work to interpolate any investigation of the artist's intentions, his identity, or the work's impact on the audience. Monroe Beardsley, for example, stresses the autonomy, independence, and relative self-sufficiency of art. All aesthetic attention is focused on the work itself.

Others think it essential to aesthetic investigation to consider the artist's conscious or unconscious intentions as they are expressed through the work, the creative process, the artist's identity, or perhaps even her views about society. Richard Wollheim expresses a version of this orientation in *Painting As An Art*,²² when he claims that a work of art may be thought of as the instantiation of the artist's intentions. John Dewey, among other theorists, thinks the impact of the work on the audience, or the interaction between the work and the audience is of fundamental importance in any study of art. In *Art as Experience* he defines aesthetic experience as a kind of "lived experience," an experiential continuum between aesthetic and other human experience²³. Utilitarian investigations focus on the instrumental significance of art, especially the functional aspects of art, such as the effect of art on society or culture. Terry Eagleton, for example, sees art as a significant cultural object only insofar as it serves a political agenda²⁴.

Moreover, after even the most elementary survey of relevant literature, we can see that the philosophy of art, while often classified as a species of value theory, involves much inquiry in areas that have little to do with the study of values, as such, yet focuses attention on intriguing studies of the instrumental worth of art. Julius Moravcsik, for example, argues for a view of art devoid of analytic definitions and based on pre-theoretic

²² Richard Wollheim, *Painting As An Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984)

²³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1934)

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990)

intuitions, or commonsense understandings, comparable to those that ground other disciplines such as medicine, chemistry, and linguistics.²⁵

My own view is that, considered pre-theoretically and intrinsically, art is an organ of human communication that makes possible through imagination shared perceptions of the world, cross-culturally and across time; art exhibits potent instrumental force in human relations. Let us conjecture that interdependence is a more integrated and more developed, possibly more rational, state of the human condition than independence. Given that conjecture, I hope to show that art contributes to human interdependence because it makes it possible for humans, particularly the artist and spectators, to communicate information outside the level of conscious awareness.

Admittedly there are many facets, both intrinsic and instrumental, of a given work of art, but a fundamental aspect is the capacity of a work of art to evoke an aesthetic perception. But what does it mean to perceive aesthetically? Some views about art define a work of art with reference to its audience. That is, art is determined by the response it evokes. Others see art as a mode of perception and response. They afford no objective criteria for determining a work of art other than the awakening of an aesthetic response on the part of the perceiver in the presence of the work of art. Yet, an aesthetic response is not inevitable in response to the work. One person at any given moment is not guaranteed a perceptually aesthetic experience in the presence of an art work.

25 Julius Moravcsik, "Why Philosophy of Art in Cross-Cultural Perspective?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Volume 51, #3, Summer, 1993.

Further, an aesthetic response, while never inevitable is always possible. Given the right mental attitude, the right environment and conformation, almost anything may be, and seemingly is, perceived aesthetically. We see sunsets, pieces of driftwood, and various artifacts, such as shovels, barbed wire, and beds aesthetically. Any object is at least potentially the ground of an aesthetic experience and some of these are art objects. Yet, despite the general source of aesthetic experience, whatever ways we define and delineate art, any work that we classify as an artwork exhibits this experiential facet. Art is a particular species of the aesthetic experience and acquires its status as art with reference to such categories of experience, not in virtue of certain necessary attributes of the work itself. We find ample proof of this in the puzzles presented by artistic look-alikes, such as Warhol's Brillo Box, Duchamp's snow shovels, bottle racks, and bicycle wheels, Rauschenberg's bed, and so on.

It is not the content of experience that distinguishes aesthetic from non-aesthetic experiences, but rather the mode of those experiences. Art is not just a way of escaping actual existence; it stimulates an alternate mode of perception, different from that employed in day-to-day living. Because of this alternate mode of perception, we are able to perceive the world through alternate paradigms. The experience of art is the interaction of the person with the environment, that enables her to disengage from the deep concern

for self and for her future. Art amplifies experience without isolating the individual from ordinary experience. It is a class of perceptually differentiated "lived experience."²⁶

Aesthetic experience involves a release from the concerns of self, from self-responsibility and self-concern. My theory of this release is a variation of the finely developed theories of aesthetic "disinterestedness" we find in Kant and Shaftesbury. Aesthetic disinterestedness is the human capacity to find release from perceiving things and events only in the light of the effect they may have on us and our futures. It is the ability to perceive a thing beyond the confines of self-interest and involves a suspension, or "bracketing" of our own narrow concerns for some period of time, a brief recess from the onerous concerns and responsibilities of human existence that are the result of human consciousness.

Absence of self concern is a distinguishing characteristic of the aesthetic experience, but does not sufficiently explain the aesthetic perception. Beyond the negative condition, absence of self concern, is the positive condition, a liberated or heightened capacity to respond to an object.

A component of this aesthetic experience is imagining. It is imagination that generates alternate realities, albeit not actual realities, and renders them objective in a way that invites exploration and discovery. Kendall Walton, in his book *Mimesis and Make-Believe*, discusses the notion of fictional worlds and their "malleability." Says Walton,

²⁶ cf. John Dewey, Chapters 1 and 2.

"We can arrange their contents [of the worlds of make-believe] as we like by manipulating props or even, if necessary altering principles of generation. We can make people turn into pumpkins, or make sure the good guys win, or see what it is like for the bad guys to win."²⁷ If the fictional world has been engendered by an artist, we enjoy more than just a fictional world to explore; we also gain from the talent and insight the artist brings to the creation.

In particular, Walton notes a benefit we derive from the experience, through imagination, of imaginary worlds:

There is a price to pay in real life when the bad guys win, even if we learn from the experience. Make-believe provides the experience—something like it anyway—for free. Catastrophes don't really occur (usually) when it is fictional that they do. The divergence between fictionality and truth spares us pain and suffering we would have to expect in the real world. We realize some of the benefits of hard experience without having to undergo it.²⁸

Thus, it is imagination that provides the link between art and reality. We are allowed to approach some of our very immediate existential problems, to grapple with and overcome them. I believe this description also applies to the human capacity for autonomy, or self-determination, if you will. It is in virtue of the world of imagination, as exemplified by the artwork, that an artist may express certain inclinations toward a

²⁷ Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundation of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 67-68.

²⁸ Walton, 68.

more developed state of human freedom, to extend the limits of human existence. To this extent the work of art functions as an expression of an imaginary world. Such an imaginary world may even demonstrate a kind of objectivity that renders the experience of it open to a community of beholders. It is the imaginative experience that makes it possible for us to explore our autonomy through art and we will examine this claim in the coming pages. First, however, we consider a brief overview of Kant's position on the interconnection between art and autonomy.

Chapter 2

Kant

Kant's project in the *Critique of Judgment* is to establish a theory about the interlock between the areas of human concerns addressed by his first two critiques: *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Pure Practical Reason*. He begins his first *Critique* by analyzing the conditions for knowledge and concludes by giving us a requisite condition for spanning the natural and moral orders. As we look briefly at his universal and transcendental concerns, we will find that Kant articulates a theory of autonomy that rests on human relationships in the context of aesthetic experience. Before we turn to an investigation of Kant's view of autonomy and its relevance to the aesthetic community, we might look over Kant's analysis in the critiques.

Kant's first enterprise in *The Critique of Pure Reason* was to explain how it is that rational agents conceive of a natural world. Kant's analysis plays off of Hume's analysis, but avoids what is sometimes (controversially) thought of as Hume's skeptical conclusion. Where Hume had regarded the categories of experience as synthetic judgments that result from habit and custom, and without claim to certain types of objective ontological validity, Kant proposed a project whereby he could derive the categories from the understanding, from the possibility of human consciousness in general and prior to experience. Kant was convinced these concepts were not simply abstractions from experience as Hume had

maintained, but that they were an intrinsic feature of human consciousness. In so doing, Kant's most important challenge was to show that some judgments are both synthetic and *a priori*. His position accords in at least some ways with Leibniz's contention that thought determines the conditions to which experience conforms. According to Kant's formulation, we achieve theoretical knowledge in a process that involves three "moments": the combination of sensations into perceptual intuitions by the Imagination under the categories of time and space, the synthetic union of intuitions about the world into conceptual judgments about such phenomena according to the *a priori* categories, and the arrangement of these judgments about natural experience into a metaphysical view of the universe as an orderly system that is regulated by certain universal ideas.

Further, Kant's analysis of theoretical knowledge establishes a dualism in both his ontology and his epistemology that is grounded on a corresponding dichotomy between the sensible or phenomenal world, and the supersensible or transcendental world. His dualism harkens back to Plato's ontology. Unlike Plato's epistemological formulation, however, Kant thinks that we can not know things in themselves as they exist in the noumenal world. Yet, Kant avoids Berkeley's idealist position because he thinks the phenomena which are open to the perceiving subject are an aspect of things in themselves. The phenomenal world is the domain of science, and the noumenal world is the domain of morality. The domain of morality is governed by Practical Reason and the domain of science is governed

by Theoretical Reason. Practical reason is a function of the human will and is rooted in the possibility of freedom.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant establishes moral order on the basis of freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God as inferences from his fundamental principles of morality. In fact, the categorical imperative, Kant's test for making a moral decision, amounts to deciding whether one, as a rational being, could will that a particular principle justifying an action should be a universal law of nature. This test of moral decision making also requires the moral principle in question to be consistent with other laws governing the universe. Kant saw the moral order with its promise of individual freedom as one that is consistent with the causally determined natural order and the moral law as constitutive of the moral nature of human beings. Moreover, the postulates of practical reason, freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God, stand as theoretical propositions that are not themselves demonstrable, but which are the necessary consequence of an unconditional *a priori* practical law.

Having established the domains of science and morality, Kant's project in the *Critique of Judgment* is to establish a consonance or compatibility between the two. He thought it necessary to bridge the gap between the sensible realm with its accompanying concept of nature and the transcendental world with its concept of freedom. Here, he addresses the connection between causal necessity and freedom of the will, and between

phenomena and noumena. It is in the nature of the aesthetic experience that he establishes this link. In particular, reflective judgment, characteristic of the aesthetic response, is the point of connection between reason and understanding.

Reflective judgment does not constitute experience--rather it regulates experience. A subject who engages in reflective judgment will not gain further knowledge about an object, which means it is not a judgment that is based on sensations. It is a judgment governed by rules. Kant suggests that these reflective judgments allow us to recognize order or purpose in our experience without being able to demonstrate or describe that order. Reflective judgments, unlike judgments of understanding or imagination, do not require a determinate concept. It describes, as we will see, a subjective use of our faculties in making judgments.

It is in the notion of "purposiveness" that Kant thinks he finds the intermediary between the natural and the moral realms:

Now even if an immeasurable gulf is fixed between the sensible realm of the concept of nature and the supersensible realm of the concept of freedom, so that no transition is possible from the first to the second (by means of the theoretical use of Reason), just as if they were two different worlds of which the first could have no influence upon the second, yet the second is *meant* to have an influence on the first. The concept of freedom is meant to actualise in the world of sense the purpose proposed by its laws, and consequently nature must be so thought that the conformity to law of its form, at least harmonises with the possibility of the purposes to be effected in it according to laws of freedom.--There must, therefore, be a ground of the *unity* of the supersensible, which lies at the basis of nature, with

that which the concept of freedom practically contains; and the concept of this ground, although it does not attain either theoretically or practically to a knowledge of the same, and hence has no peculiar realm, nevertheless makes possible the transition from the mode of thought according to the principles of the one to that according to the principles of the other." ²⁹

Peculiar to aesthetic experiences are what Kant calls judgments of taste. The *Critique of Judgment* includes Kant's critique of aesthetic and teleological judgments, both of which figure prominently in his analysis of the moral. It is important to note that Kant does not want to equate aesthetic and moral judgments, an easy error to make when he makes claims like 'beauty is the symbol of the morally good.'³⁰ What Kant does say is that aesthetic experience establishes a nexus between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds that is apprehended through moral judgment. Aesthetic judgments guide us to an apprehension of a transcendent world, while moral judgments drive us to find content in these aesthetic apprehensions.

The faculty of taste exercised in an aesthetic judgment derives pleasure that is grounded on purposive connections; a purposiveness that is not grounded on logic or morality, but is grounded on the subjective, the psychological, and the affective. It is,

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, D.D. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892) Introduction II.

³⁰ Kant, Section 59.

however, perspectiveless. Aesthetic contemplation of objects is pleasurable because of the free play and harmony of the Imagination and the Understanding.

The feeling of pleasure is occasioned by reflection upon the formal characteristics of an object, and Kant distinguishes the formal as an object of intellectual apprehension which is distinct from sensual apprehension, yet empirically grounded in the object. What this means is that aesthetic ideas are rational ideas that transcend the limits of possible human experience yet represent in a sensible mode certain characteristics of the noumenal world.³¹ Our perceptions of beauty depend upon these aesthetic ideas, given to us both through art and through nature. Thus, an artist, given any sort of medium, uses the vehicle of imagination to go beyond the limits of human experience to present intimations of the noumenal world that are not found in the phenomenal world. For example, an artist who paints a beautiful face conveys not just some contingent belief that this is a beautiful face, but that this representation somehow gives us the universal and timeless essence of beauty. It is as if the artist gives us a glimpse of a transcendental realm through an object in the natural world. Kant realized that concepts limit the imagination, but can give us a glimpse of a transcendental world that lies just beyond our grasp. The "aesthetic experience, which involves a perpetual striving to pass beyond the limits of our point of view, seems to 'embody' what cannot be thought."³²

³¹ Kant, Sections 74-75.

³² Roger Scruton, *Kant* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982) 88.

Kant believes that aesthetic experience turns on a pleasure that is induced without the mediation of a concept and without the incitement of desire, Kant's much-maligned thesis of aesthetic disinterestedness. He develops his thesis of disinterestedness in the wake of the powerful empirical tradition in aesthetics offered by such philosophers as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who emphasized the primacy of sensation in the aesthetic experience. Moreover, the empiricists generally thought judgments of taste were rooted in pain and pleasure and that aesthetic judgments evoked sensuous satisfaction without the intrusion of intellectual analysis, sometimes without appeal to formal elements or criteria for the judgment. Hume, for example, conceived of aesthetic pleasure as sensuous, relative, and subjective. He claimed that sensible qualities are not found in the objects of sensation, but originate in the perception. While British empirical tradition places sometimes unacceptable limits on aesthetic experience, we can take this notion of aesthetic disinterestedness to be a first and critical step toward the view that the aesthetic is a distinctive mode of experience. Not a new idea in western philosophical thought, aesthetic disinterestedness nevertheless represented a theoretical shift that is brought to full fruition in Kant.³³

³³ Evidence of aesthetic disinterestedness can be found in the work of various writers such as Aquinas, and, of course, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Burke, Addison, and Moses Mendelssohn. We can also find at least implicit demands for aesthetic disinterestedness in the *Upanishads* and in various Indian commentaries that argue artistic consciousness should be freed from all natural and practical relationships, investing it with meaning and positive value. cf. Sneh Pandit, *An Approach to the Indian Theory of Art and Aesthetics* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, LTD, 1977) 104,137-138.

Some contemporary theorists distrust the notion of disinterestedness because they consider it elitist and hyper-refined. Yet, aesthetic disinterestedness on Kant's analysis frees us from our human tendency to perceive things in the light of the effects they may have on us. The introduction of disinterestedness into an analysis of the aesthetic experience lifts us above selfish concern we may have when we regard an object; we no longer perceive the object instrumentally, or with regard to some end; we perceive the thing as it is in itself. Aesthetic disinterestedness allows a release from self-concern and contributes to the universality of the aesthetic experience.

When we perceive a beautiful thing, according to Kant, we don't need to have a concept of it in order to know what sort of thing the object ought to be. The reason is that aesthetic objects have no meaning and depend on no definite concepts even though they please.³⁴ Nevertheless, judgments of taste are contemplative and are indifferent to the actual existence of the object. Since it is not a judgment of cognition, it is not based on ordinary logic, nor is it dependent upon the phenomenal existence of the object. It is nothing other than a judgment with subjective content. Aesthetic contemplation is emancipated from all self-interest or desire. It is coupled with disinterestedness and is free from the preoccupation with phenomenal aspects of objects in the sensible world, but its

³⁴ Kant, Section 50.

apparent purposiveness is noumenal. Kant thought this noumenal purposiveness "promotes the sensibility of the mind for the moral feeling."³⁵

John Dewey also captures the spirit of aesthetic disinterestedness when he says:

Taken at its best, that is to say, with a liberal interpretation, contemplation designates that aspect of perception in which elements of seeking and of thinking are subordinated (although not absent) to the perfecting of the process of perception itself. To define the emotional element of esthetic perception merely as the pleasure taken in the act of contemplation, independent of what is excited by the matter contemplated, results, however, in a thoroughly anaemic conception of art. Carried to its logical conclusion, it would exclude from esthetic perception most of the subject-matter that is enjoyed in the case of architectural structures, the drama, and the novel, with all their attendant reverberation. Not absence of desire and thought but their thorough incorporation into perceptual experience characterizes esthetic experience, in its distinction from experiences that are especially 'intellectual' and 'practical.'³⁶

Dewey's interpretation, which is not far different from Kant's, although it is critical of Kant, describes contemplation and disinterestedness as constitutive of aesthetic experience, enhancing and interpreting experience, and bringing the subject to a heightened sensitivity. Kant's thesis about aesthetic disinterestedness affords universal satisfaction in the aesthetic object because the object does not evoke a concept. Since the judgment is inherent to all aesthetic expression, it must be grounded on some faculty that

³⁵ Kant, Section 49.

³⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1934)

may be presupposed in all rational creatures. Kant thinks of this as the *a priori* universal rule that consists in the subjective universal validity of pleasure derived from aesthetic experience. The perception of beauty is an *a priori* judgment and is one that Kant thinks can be attributed to all rational subjects.

Aesthetic disinterestedness untethers aesthetic perception from the purely practical context. No finite concepts can exhaust the content of an aesthetic object or a work of art. Because aesthetic content does not translate into concepts, the aesthetic transcends the limitations of the phenomenal world and somehow brings transcendental ideas such as God, freedom, infinity, and immortality into the province of human experience. Albert Hofstadter wrote:

[It] leads man into the realm of his most genuinely human freedom. It opens up for him an intuitive grasp of the infinite that is ownmost to him. In it, he is with the infinite....The aesthetic Idea as the symbolic image of the intellectually inexpressible source, ground, and possibility of the real, with which man can be united as own with own, remains a lasting result of Kant's works, a concept of art that is the first step toward an aesthetics capable of handling the deepest questions...and of bringing art into its true place in the context of human freedom.³⁷

The aesthetic liberates human experience and establishes a relation between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds that is only suggested in moral experience. It releases experience from one context to another, marked by absence of self-concern

³⁷ Albert Hofstadter, "Kant's Aesthetic Revolution," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Volume 3.2: 186.

through disinterestedness, and reveals the possibility of experience that is multi-dimensional and transcendental in scope.

II.

I now turn to a limited study of Kant's contribution to our understanding of human autonomy in the context of the aesthetic experience. Kant is the figure in the history of philosophy who is the conduit through which the philosophical thinking of the period known as the Enlightenment has been collected and conveyed to modern thought. It was during this era of western cultural thought that philosophers began to develop a consciousness of 'humanity' and to develop philosophical interest in the individual and the 'Self.' The philosophers of the Enlightenment also developed and articulated views about individuals as the repository of inalienable rights that hold simply because they are rational creatures. In fact, this view of inalienable rights, articulated in particular by John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, grounds the ideologies of the American and French revolutions.

In aesthetics, Kant generated a revolution just as significant as his "Copernican revolution" in epistemology and metaphysics. Some scholars think that without Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetics as we know it would never have evolved. There is no question that since Plato no other philosopher gave aesthetic experience such a critical role in philosophy. By all counts, Kant was the first philosopher who recognized the

importance of a theory of aesthetics to metaphysics and moral theory. For only a creature who is rational can experience beauty, and without the experience of beauty, rationality lacks force. As Roger Scruton observes:

Aesthetic experience intimates to us that our point of view is, after all, only *our* point of view, and that we are no more creators of nature than we are creators of the point of view from which we observe and act on [nature]. Momentarily we stand outside that point of view, not so as to have knowledge of a transcendent world, but so as to perceive the harmony that exists between our faculties and the objects in relation to which they are employed. At the same time we sense the divine order that makes this harmony possible.³⁸

Kant develops his view of rationality and human nature in the shadow of Rousseau, who distinguished human from other creatures not on the basis of intellect and rationality, but on the capacity for autonomy, in the sense that humans are capable of self-legislation and self-direction. Kant's aesthetic revolution is generated at least in part by his concern with the problem of individual freedom in the context of a causally determined world and in the context of a society of other autonomous and rational creatures that comprise the social community. Perhaps the most important aspect of his aesthetic analysis penetrates to the transcendental source of human autonomy, the ground of individual autonomy within the community of rational beings. Kant presents an analysis of individual autonomy in aesthetic experience in order to bridge the gap between his phenomenal and noumenal worlds.

³⁸ Scruton, 80.

In the first and second *Critiques*, Kant's analysis had severed the worlds of nature and morality. Thus, the problem Kant addresses in the third *Critique* is the possibility that the moral domain exercises some influence on the natural domain, and that moral laws have force in the natural world. What Kant has to explain in order for moral imperatives and inducements to be brought to bear is that moral law has force in the natural world. Kant himself says that human freedom is the base of the transcendental realm which forms the backdrop for the natural and the moral worlds:

Now even if an immeasurable gulf is fixed between the sensible realm of the concept of nature and the supersensible realm of the concept of freedom, so that no transition is possible from the first to the second (by means of the theoretical use of Reason), just as if they were two different worlds of which the first could have no influence upon the second, yet the second is *meant* to have an influence upon the first. The concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the world of sense the purpose proposed by its laws, and consequently nature must be so thought that the conformity to law of its form, at least harmonises with the possibility of the purposes to be effected in it according to laws of freedom.--There must, therefore, be a ground of the *unity* of the supersensible, which lies at the basis of nature, with that which the concept of freedom practically contains; and the concept of this ground, although it does not attain either theoretically or practically to a knowledge of the same, and hence has no peculiar realm, nevertheless makes possible the transition from the mode of thought according to the principles of the one to that according to the principles of the other.³⁹

³⁹ Kant, Introduction, Section II.

The universality of the principles of the moral law, as Kant shows, is grounded on duty, but if duty is to make legitimate demands upon human behavior it must also presuppose autonomy on the part of the agent. Autonomy is nothing if not rational. So, the essence of morality is autonomy, freedom that is universally attributed to all rational creatures. John Kemp suggests that Kant establishes the place of human agency in the natural order, not by arguing theoretically for a metaphysical order, but by showing that there is nothing that logically precludes belief in the transcendental world of freedom and objective truth, no matter how dependent upon subjective features of the human mind. The ideas of reason and the ideas of the transcendental realm are ideas that Kant believes surface in rational consciousness as God, freedom, and immortality, and also in moral imperatives and aesthetic imagination. Moral and aesthetic sensibility serve only to remind us that we are to behave as if we are members of a transcendental world, while limited in fact to the natural world. The domains of the aesthetic and the moral are intimations of our ties to the noumenal.⁴⁰

For the Kantian subject, the great gap that occurs between the noumenal and the phenomenal is mediated by the aesthetic idea. When an aesthetic idea is expressed, for example, in a work of art, an image is expressed that suggests a rational idea whose source is the noumenal.⁴¹ In his discussions of artistic genius, which he defines as the capacity

⁴⁰ cf. John Kemp, *The Philosophy of Kant* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 90-91.

⁴¹ cf. Hofstadter, 186-187.

to imagine aesthetic ideas that are counterparts to rational ideas, Kant assumes that works of art paradigmatically have moral content.⁴² Aesthetic experience, under Kant's description, enables us to place ourselves in the context of a transcendental order that lies beyond the reach of thought, but nevertheless defines the contours of human freedom and agency.⁴³ Says Kant:

We have in the world beings of but one kind whose causality is teleological, or directed to ends, and which at the same time are beings of such a character that the law according to which they have to determine ends for themselves is represented by themselves as unconditioned and not dependent on anything in nature, but as necessary in itself. The being of this kind is man, but man regarded as noumenon. He is the only natural creature whose peculiar objective characterization is nevertheless such as to enable us to recognize in him a supersensible faculty—his *freedom*—and to perceive both the law of causality and the object of freedom which that faculty is able to set before itself as the highest end—the supreme good in the world.⁴⁴

The dimension in human existence, then, that is the ground for the union of freedom and nature is the aesthetic experience. This union is exemplified in the judgment of taste, where nature and freedom are linked in experience. The primary focus of Kant's

⁴² Kant, Sections 49 & 50.

⁴³ This interpretation of the aesthetic idea, when applied to art, ultimately freed it from the highly formalized limitations of taste and culture that were in force during the Enlightenment and rendered art a vehicle capable of expressing the human drive for autonomy.

⁴⁴ Kant, Section 84.

analysis was directed at this rational personhood and human freedom. But Kant's understanding of freedom is somewhat limited for two reasons: (a) he did not grasp the broad connotation of the word, and (b) his rational agent suffers from an excessive individualism. Kant's agent is considered in isolation, a state that distorts our understanding of rational agency and is therefore unrealistic. Adequate ascriptions of autonomy require some acknowledgement that rational individuals exist in community and are socially defined. As we will see, because of these flaws, Kant is able to give us only a preliminary and partial concept of autonomy.

III

Kant provides a transcendental framework or condition of possibility for human freedom in his third *Critique*. Kant's search for human freedom began in the first *Critique* with metaphysics through his moral theory to aesthetics, which opens his view of the transcendental as the ultimate source of our autonomy. His work certainly represents great progress in our philosophical conception of autonomy. Kant's contribution to our understanding of human autonomy has to do with his insight that autonomy is a state that is contingent upon our capacity to view others as cognitive, moral, and rational agents. These agents are equal to ourselves and their goods and ends are regarded as equal and consistent with our own. Aesthetic ideas in general are the ground of our search for autonomy. But, it is through imagination that this transcendental view of human autonomy

is opened to our limited perspective in the aesthetic experience and it is through imagination that we may confer the possibility of autonomy on other agents. Albert Hofstadter comments that art "as expression of aesthetic Ideas, becomes the medium by which man's ultimate freedom, his Being-with-the infinitely transcendent-as-own is disclosed for imagination and made available for the life of feeling in this finite temporal world."⁴⁵

Along similar lines, Kant's vision of human autonomy focuses on autonomy of the will; in other words, freedom is the power to will an end of action for oneself in accordance with reason. So, the laws of freedom are principles by which an agent guides action. Kant conceives of the agent as capable of acting on the basis of reason alone. Any other stimulus to act, such as emotion, desire, interest, or self-interest, is considered heteronomous and belongs to the causal realm or the natural world. Heteronomous action is not free in the strict sense since the agent is not the source of the action. Roger Scruton likens heteronomous acts to the actions of a bullet or a gear in a machine. We can't reasonably claim that a car 'acts' or a gear in a machine 'acts' any more than we can say that our actions are our own if they are not free. The discussion of heteronomous acts figures into the free will/determinism controversy that peppers philosophical literature and vexes philosophers who consider the problem.

⁴⁵ Hofstadter, 187.

Kant addresses this ancient dilemma of the incompatibility of freedom of the will and the causal determinacy of the natural world. Ralf Meerbote remarks that Kant distinguishes between positive and negative conceptions of freedom and identifies positive freedom with autonomy.⁴⁶ Under this description, Kant sees a free action as one that incorporates positive conceptions of freedom and is controlled by pure *a priori* reason. He believes we are free from the causal demands of the phenomenal world because we are more than phenomenal beings. An agent is said to be the source of his or her actions whenever he or she acts with critical awareness and deliberation choosing one action over another. So, in the second *Critique* Kant tells us that autonomous agents are those who act on the basis of reason alone, and not on heteronomous demands, especially when those demands do not accord with those agents' rational impulses.

We can say that actions based on deliberation or independent of impulses derived from the senses are free. Kant's analysis suggests that rational agents are free for two reasons: (1) all rational actions presuppose at least minimal levels of freedom, since it would be false to ascribe an action to a particular agent if this were not the case, and (2) human consciousness implies self-consciousness and hence, agency and spontaneity to act. Makkreel also sees Kantian freedom as the capacity to make decisions and choices based

⁴⁶ Rudolf Makkreel, "Kant on the Nondeterminate Character of Human Actions," in *Kant on Causality, Freedom, and Objectivity*, editors, William A. Harper and Ralf Meerbote (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 138-163.

on conscious deliberation, and autonomy as therefore inherently conscious and free.⁴⁷ We may conclude that Kantian rational agents are autonomous because they generate rational choice and the capacity for self-determination and self-articulation.

As Roger Scruton notes, our perspective on the world comprises two aspects: first, a sense of transcendental unity that underlies our knowledge of nature, and secondly, a sense of transcendental freedom that underlies our capacity for practical reason. We distill our sense of the unity of consciousness and transcendental freedom from our knowledge of the phenomenal world and both are assumed *a priori* as preconditions for human knowledge. Scruton further says that the unity of consciousness, the starting-point for all knowledge of truths and transcendental freedom, is the starting-point for all deliberation. In a negative sense, they are transcendental starting-points because they lie at the limit of what can be known.⁴⁸ This means that freedom, which amounts to a perspectival viewpoint on the phenomenal world, can not also be part of that world. It is this *a priori* assumption of our own autonomy that is a part of the ground of our perspective, an extension of our transcendental selves.

But talk of transcendental selves leads Kant to metaphysical difficulties with respect to this idea of a transcendental freedom. For one thing, how are we to individuate transcendental selves from one another or decide what constitutes identity for a

⁴⁷ Makkreel, 147.

⁴⁸ Scruton, 61.

transcendental self? And for another, how can we say that a self that exists transcendently can nevertheless cause an event in the phenomenal world? Kant realized that human autonomy issues in a paradox; that if we are, as he contends, citizens of a transcendental world, the categories of understanding do not apply to us and that this paradox is insoluble on the basis of theoretical reason and only hinted at in practical reason.⁴⁹ That we have a sense of awe and respect for the moral law is attributable to our transcendental origin and perspective.

Despite these metaphysical difficulties, Kant maintains that inherent to the aesthetic experience is the subject's sense of community. One can even say that community is the groundwork of the aesthetic idea. This is not to say that Kant accepts social grounds as a reason to take an interest in art or the beautiful. He does not think that the aesthetic is a subliminal attempt to link us to other humans or with society, or to maintain society. On these points, it is a mistake to think that Kant believes strengthening our sociability strengthens our pleasure in art or the aesthetic. Kant rejects an empirical interest in Beauty, and in particular, rejects sociability as the ground of an aesthetic (or for that matter, moral or social) theory because he does not seek the empirical foundations of the aesthetic experience, but its *a priori* conditions.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Scruton, 79.

⁵⁰ Kant, Section 41.

Kant also makes it clear that aesthetic judgments concern subjective feelings and are emotive judgments as well. For Kant, a genuinely aesthetic judgment is subjective. It is subjective even though we take pleasure in our perception of an object and mistakenly transmute those qualities to claims about the object. With respect to this point, Kant recognizes two logical peculiarities of aesthetic judgments. Even though aesthetic experience is subjective, it claims the agreement of all rational creatures as though it were an objective judgment; and although the agent cannot provide any sort of proof for aesthetic claims, an aesthetic judgment nevertheless has "exemplary validity" providing us with the justifiable expectation that others will agree with our judgment.⁵¹

Aesthetic judgments are, therefore, necessarily intersubjective because of the universality in the content of such judgments and our expectation that others will agree with our judgments. On this view aesthetic judgments intimate the possibility of genuine communication in human experience.⁵² It is in the freeplay between imagination and understanding that we derive a sense of the unity of experience without concepts. Albert Hofstadter acknowledges the moral significance of this aesthetic response because the existence of natural beauty stands as a sign the world is hospitable to our objectives. Implicit, then, in our aesthetic judgments, like our moral ones, is the appeal we make to other rational beings, on the basis of our "common structure and operation of our cognitive

⁵¹ Kant, Sections 31, 35, 38.

⁵² Hofstadter, 182.

faculties in imagination and understanding"⁵³ that others will assent to our judgments. Although one's imaginative free play in aesthetic judgment is totally subjective--it is universal in meaning. In aesthetic judgment, we "speak with the voice of all humanity to the whole human community; the freedom of people. In this experience I join myself to humanity and invite humanity to join with me...in the mutual freedom which beauty grants us." ⁵⁴ Our aesthetic experiences are analogous to our moral experiences because this freedom of imagination is analogous to freedom of will. We apprehend the aesthetic as an experience of freedom with aesthetic judgments bearing a symbolic relation to moral good.

As members of Kant's Kingdom of Ends, populated by autonomous individuals, we join in a genuinely human communion of autonomous individuals because the experience allows us to transcend the confines of subjectivity. In Kant's aesthetic theory, individual autonomy is fleshed out and given a dimension that it did not have in his moral theory. In the *Third Critique*, Kant adds to the concept of the autonomous individual as a self-determining, self-legislating member of the Kingdom of Ends by defining that individual precisely as a **member**, one individual among other, equally autonomous, individuals who realize their humanity and their rationality in the context of the other. These individuals do not submit themselves to external authority, but to the governance

⁵³ Hofstadter, 182.

⁵⁴ Hofstadter, 182.

of inner authority and rationality. Such individuals govern, determine, and define themselves, and are, in a word, autonomous. They are agents who never regard others as means, but as equally rational and autonomous members of the community.

This is one way that Kant describes the conjunction of the aesthetic with the moral. To regard and behave toward others as citizens of a Kingdom of Ends means that we engage Kant's Categorical Imperative. True freedom for Kant is "this absolutely universally valid Being-with-other-as-with-own which is attained by means of the autonomous rational self-determination of each individual."⁵⁵ In aesthetic judgment, the agent serves as a reflection of the *sensus communis* and gives it a universal voice.

Exactly what Kant means by this *sensus communis* is not entirely clear, and as one might expect, is the subject of various interpretations by scholars of Kant. Martin Schonfeld, for example, thinks that Kant is ambiguous about the notion in sections 20 and 40 of the third *Critique*. Says Schonfeld: "On the one hand, it seems to Kant that we need to have some universal sense of this sort in order to allow for the possibility of talking coherently about Beauty and understanding each other but then again, it is not clear where and how we can identify such a sense..."⁵⁶

What Kant does say about the *sensus communis* is that it is a sense common to all rational creatures, an operation of reflection that allows us to account for, at least in

⁵⁵ Hofstadter, 175.

⁵⁶ Martin Schonfeld, personal communication, June 10, 1996.

theory, the judgments of other rational subjects. It is the capacity to discard narrow and private judgments in favor of a "universal standpoint", a perspective that consists of our *a priori* capacity to communicate feelings and impressions without a mediating concept.⁵⁷

According to Kant:

under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e. of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, as it were, to compare its judgment with the collective reason of humanity, and thus to escape the illusion arising from the private conditions that could be so easily taken for objective, which would injuriously affect the judgment. This is done by comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment.⁵⁸

Put this way, the *sensus communis* appears to function as a condition of aesthetic understanding and communicability. It makes it possible to execute judgments that accord with those of our fellow beings and which stand as expressions of our common humanity. A judgment of taste is a vehicle of communication.⁵⁹ Judgments of taste cultivate "our individual judgment through a dialogue based on the capacities for reason and feeling

⁵⁷ Kant, Section 39.

⁵⁸ Kant, Section 40.

⁵⁹ Kant, Section 40.

which we possess in common with others."⁶⁰ On the basis of this *sensus communis* we acknowledge the rational and affective capacities of others in such a way that we cultivate intersubjective harmony, accord, and dialogue between subjects.

Rudolf Makkreel interprets the *sensus communis* as a "subjective communal context more fundamental than an objective context."⁶¹ He also views it as an aspect of aesthetic judgment that allows us to orient ourselves away from self-interest to consider the perspective of a community of subjects, to universalize our judgment. Such experiences give depth and insight into our relationships to other individuals, particularly our understanding of politics and culture.

Kant makes it clear that the universality of taste comes through the "common understanding of Men" and in particular the maxims of common human understanding which are: (1) to think for oneself; (2) to put oneself in the place of everyone else; and (3) always to think consistently. The first maxim enjoins us to reason independently of the prejudices and external influences around us, and the second encourages us to go beyond the narrow confines of subjectivity and to enlarge our thoughts to arrive at a universal standpoint. This represents the escape from subjectivity and the ability to

⁶⁰ Kemal, 126.

⁶¹ Makkreel, 65.

perceive another subject as an independent perspective on the world. It also acknowledges others as subjects, who join with us to create a network of intersubjectivity.⁶²

Salim Kemal comments on Kant's third maxim, "to always think consistently":

We relate our judgment to others' in our present community in the consciousness that this activity is not monolithic but a creative grasping capable of change. We seek consistency because it provides us with a mechanism for moving towards the inclusive order of the ideal of universality from our present community, with its determinate forms, arbitrary associations, and conflicts. The search for consistency becomes an examination of our responses to diagnose, in those instances where universality fails us, why that failure occurs. Through such continuous labour, the ability to think of others and of ourselves as members of a community presumably becomes more powerful.⁶³

Aesthetic experience, in particular, is an expression of the *sensus communis* because of the universal standpoint that it requires. Makkreel's interest is in the interpretation required by judgments of taste and in the function of imagination in interpretation. He shows that there is a systematic interrelation between our experience of beauty and our interpretation of that experience. This interrelation turns on our "communal context", on our ability to propose order and meaning for the data of

⁶² Kant, Section 41.

⁶³ Kemal, 163.

experience.⁶⁴ Thus, aesthetic experience depends on this operation of imagination grounded on and articulated through the *sensus communis*.

IV.

On this Kantian account, the aesthetic experience contributes to individual autonomy because the subject enters into a reciprocal relationship with other subjects to create culture and community, thereby contributing to the autonomy of all who participate. Salim Kemal recognizes dual aspects of the Kantian 'subject', with one being entirely subjective and distinct while the other renders us able to enter into rational and emotive dialogue with other subjects, but it is clear that Kant never fully recognizes the importance of this aspect. Although a judgment of taste is a subjective act, it is grounded on intersubjective validity of a community.⁶⁵ Kant notes that individuals are not sovereign subjects with respect to the aesthetic experience, but are always suitor[s] for agreement from others. Their autonomy is warranted only insofar as it receives confirmation from other subjects.⁶⁶

Yet, we should not make the mistake of thinking the aesthetic experience is any less subjective because of its dependence upon intersubjective validity; "because the experience

⁶⁴ Makkeel, 65.

⁶⁵ Kemal, 123.

⁶⁶ Kant, Section 19.

is subjective, only other subjects can grasp it in its subjectivity."⁶⁷ The juxtaposition of subjectivity and intersubjectivity leads one to wonder whether the judgment of taste is fundamentally self-undermining. Such a judgment is at once aesthetic, and therefore, an expression of subjective experience, and also a judgment claiming assent from the aesthetic community. It depends on immediate pleasure rather than reason, but is the expression of a rational subject. One gets the sense from Kant that the experience of beauty is a uniquely human experience that turns on the intersection of reason and nature and is a central feature of our humanity. Kant characterizes the aesthetic experience as disinterested, subjective, universal, and generated by the harmonious free play of imagination and understanding.⁶⁸ Such judgments involve pleasure and because they concern only the relation between subject and object, are entirely subjective. But, as we have seen, these judgments are necessarily communicable⁶⁹ and are thus inextricably bound to the aesthetic judgments of other subjects who assent on the basis of their own subjective and independent judgments.

Kant's explanation about such subjective judgments and the confirmation of those judgments by other members of the aesthetic community tells us something else about

⁶⁷ Kemal, 124.

⁶⁸ Kant, Section 9.

⁶⁹ Kant, Section 21.

aesthetic judgment. Judgments of taste, built on the experience of pleasure, do not follow ordinary patterns of assent:

The claim that an object is beautiful depends essentially on an experience of pleasure and cannot be inferred or deduced from any general property of the object....By this account, the actual judgement of taste must satisfy two criteria--particular judgments must gain confirmation from the community and the confirmed judgement must depend on the subject's autonomous activity in grasping and ordering some material in a pleasurable judgement. In effect Kant's theory points to a mutual dependence between the subject and the community. Neither gains serious employment without the other. The subject's particular claims remain questionable until the community validates them, and the force of the community remains ineffective until the subject deploys it in the act of judging some material. The individual's acts have a social character at the same time as the social formation must make room for the individual's autonomous activity.⁷⁰

Perhaps instead of emphasizing "aesthetic disinterestedness" as the distinguishing characteristic of Kantian aesthetics, we should instead think of "subjective universality". Kant's explanation of the universality of the aesthetic experience necessarily involves the possibility of more than one subject's participation in a judgment of taste. The universality of the experience is not contingent upon properties that inhere in the object, but rather upon the participation of a community of subjects. Moreover, the extent and force of that

⁷⁰ Kemal, 122-123.

universality is apparent only as the participating subjects form a community and explore the details of that connection through the experience.⁷¹

This relation of mutuality and communication allows us to describe aesthetic experience without established rules and criteria for judgments of taste, often criticized as a weak point in Kant's aesthetics. Yet his analysis is persuasive just because he gives us no canon of aesthetic rules against which we must measure our aesthetic judgments; judgments of taste afford opportunities for rational subjects to build relationships. This is not to say that an individual can not give reasons for an aesthetic judgment with respect to a particular and unique aesthetic object. But judgments of taste "celebrate the relation of individual to community, which is ever in process, for the individual's autonomous judgement is always in search of a warrant from the community, which is itself always in a process of development that depends on assent from its members."⁷²

The paradoxical nature of Kantian aesthetics should be evident by now. Kant talks about aesthetic judgments that are universally valid, yet subjective; purposive without a purpose; exhibit exemplary necessity but are not necessary truths; involve a pleasure that is abstract; express beauty that is "free" and without content. Kant's depiction of the aesthetic experience reveals its dependence on immediate pleasure, not on reason, and warrants its demand for universal assent. Our feelings and judgments are deemed aesthetic

⁷¹ Kemal, 161.

⁷² Kemal, 125.

because of their direct relation to experience without a concept. For this reason, no subject can judge the aesthetic quality of an object if that object has never been a direct object of her experience. Contrast this with scientific judgments, which we may receive through intermediate means such as authoritative sources. If we are not, however, acquainted with works of Botticelli or Stravinsky, we have no reason to accept another's informed opinion that these works are beautiful.⁷³

Nor do aesthetic judgments admit of mediation or argument because they are free of concepts. Beauty is not a concept, according to Kant, else it would admit of dispute and proof.⁷⁴ We can not regard another subject as an authoritative voice that something is beautiful; we make aesthetic judgments only through direct and unmediated experience. Although subjectively valid, aesthetic judgments exhibit the peculiarity of claiming the assent of other subjects, as if they were objective judgments resting on knowledge that could be established by proof.⁷⁵ Judgments of taste support and depend upon a community of rational subjects. Although subjective, aesthetic judgments do not describe a subject's state of mind, but evaluate an individual empirical experience, pleasure.⁷⁶ This experience (of pleasure) is counted as universally valid and necessary. We see that aesthetic

⁷³ Kant, Section 29.

⁷⁴ Kant, Sections 33, 40.

⁷⁵ Kant, Section 33.

⁷⁶ Kant, Sections 33-37.

judgments also have a normative character since they are the products of rational subjects. Insofar as a subject is endowed with cognitive faculties and we justifiably assume his faculties reflect a similar capacity in all rational beings, we can say that aesthetic judgments are valid for everyone and everyone *ought* to regard a particular object as beautiful.⁷⁷

Kant tells us that the pleasure we derive from the experience of beautiful objects is generated by the free play of imagination. Imagination functions as one of our rational faculties to bring unity to perception. Only rational beings can perceive the unity of an experience or art work and Kant makes it clear that the perception of unity is the ground of aesthetic experience. Further, through this free exercise of imagination, Kant thinks we can bring concepts to bear on an experience that is, itself, without conceptual content:

The cognitive powers, which are involved by this representation are here in free play, because no definite concept limits them to a definite rule of cognition. Hence, the state of mind in this representation must be a feeling of the free play of the representative powers in a given representation with reference to a cognition in general....a representation by which an object is given, that is to become a cognition in general, requires *Imagination*, for the gathering together the manifold of intuition, and *Understanding*, for the unity of the concept uniting the representations. This state of *free play* of the cognitive faculties in a representation by which an object is given, must be universally communicable; because cognition, as the determination of the Object with which given

⁷⁷ Kant, Sections 37-38.

representations (in whatever subject) are to agree, is the only kind of representation which is valid for every one.⁷⁸

Moreover, like other cognitions and judgments, Kant supposes an aesthetic experience to admit of universal communication. Our feelings, excited by an aesthetic experience, are universally communicable and this further attests to the presence of a sense common to all rational creatures.⁷⁹

The subjective universal communicability of the mode of representation in a judgment of taste, since it is to be possible without presupposing a definite concept, can refer to nothing else than the state of mind in the freeplay of the Imagination and the Understanding...We are conscious that this subjective relation, suitable for cognition in general, must be valid for every one, and thus must be universally communicable, just as if it were a definite cognition resting always on that relation as its subjective condition.⁸⁰

Whenever we experience the beautiful, Kant presupposes the capacity to communicate our most private and personal reactions along with a sympathy for humankind in general that "constitutes the spirit of humanity", which we may construe as intersubjectivity. Thus, Kant connects the aesthetic experience to the human condition, involving a universal feeling of sympathy and an ability to engage in communication of a personal nature. This relation determines our sociality. Aesthetic experience contributes

⁷⁸ Kant, Section 9.

⁷⁹ Kant, Section 21.

⁸⁰ Kant, Section 9.

to our "ability to grasp the humanity of others, to treat them as subjects like ourselves, without subsuming them as objects that are means to our ends, [so that we are disposed to treat] others as ends and equals."⁸¹

Kant's analysis of the sublime also emphasizes the relation between aesthetics and morality where we are given license to conceptualize abstractions through imagination. Through such experience, we may "transcend the limits imposed by embodiment."⁸² Judgments of taste, which universalize our perspective, convey the idea that our private sensations and feelings are not the only expression of subjectivity. In addition, it contributes to our capacity for moral sentiment or respect for moral ideas; moral ideas which also stand open to universal apprehension by autonomous subjects.

Kant links aesthetic and moral judgments on the basis of the manner of judgment rather than on the content of those judgments. He even suggests that the universal nature of aesthetic judgments cultivates moral feelings because it fosters our ability to treat other subjects as ends and to transform ourselves from being subjects who are limited to private feelings to subjects who are capable of universal perspectives with a shared sensibility and sensitivity to other subjects.⁸³ Kemal observes: "the universality of aesthetic judgements cultivates moral feeling—the ability to treat other subjects as ends and to distinguish oneself

⁸¹ Kemal, 117.

⁸² Kemal, 113.

⁸³ Kant, Section 60.

as an agent having only 'private' feelings from oneself as an agent capable of a 'universal' perspective in which we accommodate ourselves to...others."⁸⁴

We may draw two inferences from this: one is that the apprehension of beauty through the aesthetic experience is at least one means of deepening autonomy through intersubjectivity. Secondly, our humanness appears through the arrangement of our relationships with others. With respect to the second point, Kant thinks of the aesthetic experience as a uniquely human and humanizing experience because it is founded on both reason and nature in a way that is significant only for rational creatures. He also sees the aesthetic experience as the defining point of our humanity. Our universal feeling of sympathy and our "ability to communicate universally our inmost feeling" are constitutive of the social life of humanity.⁸⁵ The communicability of aesthetic feeling generates a kind of relation that occurs between mutually responsive individuals and is grounded on our capacity to comprehend the humanity of other subjects and to treat them as subjects like ourselves, rather than as objects, and to suppose these other subjects are members of the Kingdom of Ends.⁸⁶ Aesthetic perception is unmistakably social in character and Kant's theory about the judgment of taste, then, is grounded on the intersubjective nature of

⁸⁴ Kemal, 117.

⁸⁵ Kant, Section 60.

⁸⁶ Kemal, 117.

aesthetic judgment. Such a judgment depends upon an at least theoretical corroboration by a community of subjects.

With respect to the first inference, Kant makes it clear that an autonomous subject is a self-legislating member of humanity, an expression of moral personhood, and that he does not achieve autonomy despite, or without, other subjects. Because it is fundamentally intersubjective, autonomy implies a community of human beings, rather than isolation from other subjects. "Our moral behavior is autonomous but neither isolated from that of other subjects nor removed from cultural progress. The individual must be capable of legislating for himself as a member of the Kingdom of Ends....a subject cannot develop his humanity while disregarding others' ".⁸⁷

V

Kant's views about autonomy and the structure of the aesthetic experience form part of his complex account of the contribution of aesthetics to culture and the conditions for morality. He provides practical connotations for aesthetic activity in his discussion of culture as a context in which subjects recognize one another as compatible and social equals placed in a social and historical setting.⁸⁸ He regards "...beauty and aesthetic judgements [as] a part of culture because they promote our humanity through an activity

⁸⁷ Kemal, 121.

⁸⁸ Kant, Section 41.

in which we treat each other as subjects who are ends in themselves, capable of reasoning...."⁸⁹ Culture is a kind of progressive enterprise that promotes human rationality and the social, not just individual, good. It is progressive in two ways: Firstly, because it grows in relation to the participation of various members of the community;⁹⁰ and secondly, because it leads us to overcome ourselves in order to develop our rationality, while diminishing the influence of irrational tendencies. Culture then becomes a vehicle for bridging the gulf between nature and freedom that Kant discusses in his introduction to the third *Critique*. It facilitates our efforts to regard humans as ends and moral persons.⁹¹

Culture is also the intersection of aesthetic judgment and morality. Kant describes the collective cultivation of our moral sense as culture, or as the ground of morality, and that aesthetic judgment contributes to culture. Aesthetic apprehension linked with the cultivation of our moral sensibility contribute to cultural development.⁹² Imagination and the *sensus communis* contribute to Kant's model of culture and history, the product of this multitude of autonomous and rational agents.⁹³ Culture both promotes our ability to set

⁸⁹ Kemal, 126.

⁹⁰ Kemal, 121 & 164.

⁹¹ Kemal, 120.

⁹² Kant, Sections 52 & 70.

⁹³ Kemal, 165.

ends and to behave and progress morally. Kant thinks of the "power to set ends", or to establish our own agendas as a characteristic feature of human autonomy. This is a capacity to behave according to moral principles toward which every rational creature strives. Kant's aesthetic that incorporates the "communicability of sensation"⁹⁴ and "taste as a kind of communicative sense"⁹⁵ provides a direct link to our endeavor to cultivate moral feeling.

In Kantian terms, individual autonomy and aesthetic judgments constitute part of the larger process in which we all engage, that of developing humanity and becoming a community of subjects. Autonomy, like the aesthetic, always figures in the relation of the subject to the community and is always in process. The aesthetic, like the autonomous individual, can not stand alone, out of context and independent of other forms and activities of life. Kant recognizes the connection between community and judgments of taste and between the universality of aesthetic judgments and moral judgments.⁹⁶ Furthermore, participation of individual subjects in aesthetic judgment not only validates the social order, it also "gives us the possibility of generating new and liberating ones from that source by changing social life as our participation in the community develops."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Kant, Section 39.

⁹⁵ Kant, Section 40.

⁹⁶ Kant, Section 60.

⁹⁷ Kemal, 125.

Aesthetic judgment testifies to the ever changing relationship of the subject to the community, "for the individual's autonomous judgement is always in search of a warrant from the community, which is itself always in a process of development that depends on assent from its members."⁹⁸

Human autonomy is manifest in the universality of aesthetic judgments because when we judge aesthetically we implicitly regard subjects as free, feeling, rational beings. The autonomy of the subject plays a crucial role in the universality of aesthetic judgments, for it is through and because of aesthetic experience and the judgment of taste that we apprehend freedom in nature. Freedom, as a presupposition of morality

proves its objective reality in nature by means of the effects it can produce there....We have therefore in us a principle capable of determining the Idea of the supersensible within us, and thus also that of the supersensible without us, for knowledge, although only in a practical point of view....Consequently the concept of freedom (as fundamental concept of all unconditioned practical laws) can extend Reason beyond those bounds within which every natural (theoretical) concept must remain hopelessly limited.⁹⁹

As we develop our aesthetic sensitivity towards universality, we also develop those universal feelings of sympathy and communication that generate moral feeling and contribute to our humanity and autonomy, a topic we turn to next.

⁹⁸ Kemal, 125.

⁹⁹ Kant, Section 91.

Chapter 3

Art and the Community of Experience: Semantic and Aesthetic Content

We have seen that Kant thinks art provides an aesthetic experience, essentially social in nature. Aesthetic apprehension is a vehicle by which we may move from an individual viewpoint to a social and communal viewpoint, to that universality imparted by intersubjectivity. This view is echoed in various ways by John Dewey, Roger Scruton, Terry Eagleton, Richard Wollheim, and Ernst Gombrich, all of whom recognize the affect aesthetic factors play in the communal aspect of works of art. What I assume in this argument but do not attempt to prove, is the notion that interdependence is more integrated, developed, and more desirable, and possibly a more rational state of the human condition than independence. The world we are given is one composed of innumerable subjects as we engage our practical concerns in this intersubjective world. Given that assumption, I hope to further develop the view that art contributes to human interdependence because it makes it possible for the artist and spectators, to communicate information that transcends temporal and social limitations.

Though there are many intrinsic and instrumental aspects of a given work of art, the fundamental capacity of a work of art is its potential to evoke an aesthetic experience. What does it mean to experience art aesthetically? Some views about art define art with

reference to its audience. In other words, art is determined by the response it evokes. Other theorists see art as a mode of perception and response. They afford no objective criteria for determining the nature of a work of art other than the awakening of an aesthetic response on the part of the subject in its presence.

A version of Kant's disinterestedness, the absence of self-concern, a kind of psychic distance, may distinguish the aesthetic experience, but it alone does not fully explain aesthetic perception. Drugs and other mind- and mood-altering substances may release us from self-concern, but the consequence is a flattening of our psychological responses and a corresponding incapacity to respond to things in our environment. Beyond this negative condition, absence of self-concern, is the positive condition--a liberated or heightened capacity to respond to an object. In contrast to the effects of drugs or mind-altering substances, art has the capacity to enhance our responses to our environment.

Jerry Farber elaborates upon this capacity in *A Field Guide to the Aesthetic Experience*, where he says:

Art is defined by the frame that separates it from the practical context. This frame is what makes possible the aesthetic liberation of experience. The individual self, the "me" passes from the ever-threatened ever-embattled frame of its own narrow identity into that other frame, that refuge from the practical context, which is a work of art. But to live liberated, not in any refuge, but in the midst of the practical context, requires something akin to a deframing of that very self which we have, since early infancy, learned to establish. The boundaries are retained, you might say, but without their former meaning....Aesthetic liberation is accomplished by transferring experience from one frame to

another more or less parallel frame which is not subject to self-concern....Art does reveal the possibility, within its frame at least, of experience which is full, dimensional, affective and liberated. Some people may be led to make a connection between this revelation and their ordinary lives as they are lived out in the practical context. Others may not, and among them may well be those who have the most continual need of art.¹⁰⁰

According to Farber, we enjoy a thing aesthetically when the contents of that object are somehow bracketed or framed, either literally or figuratively. When we think of an artwork, the work is framed in such a way as to create pattern and coherence that emphasizes internal relationships in the work. Framing occurs in various ways, all specific to the work in question. For example, dance may frame certain bodily movements, a musical work may frame a certain sound in order to call attention to it, poetry makes use of the patterns we find in language by framing rhyme schemes, syllabic organizations, and visual constructs of the line upon the page. Likewise, a book tends to frame its contents; a frame literally frames a painting, and so on. The frame both distinguishes an object of aesthetic attention and reveals the patterns and symbols that occur within the frame.

II.

If we think of art as a type of communication, and an art work as a message, as an artifact with informational content, we may also think of the of the work as a complex of

¹⁰⁰ Jerry Farber, *A Field Guide to the Aesthetic Experience*. (North Hollywood, California: Foreworks Publishers, 1982): N. 246.

symbols. An art work encodes a message using available symbols from a repertoire, or collection, of symbols and relevant rules of usage. We may further consider the artist to be a transmitter of such a message and the beholder of the work to be a receptor. Since art functions in various media, we may also suppose that any pair of individuals in a society may be conversant in a number of media. As such, some information will be common to various transmitters and receptors in varying degrees. For example, two individuals may share knowledge of English, have high school diplomas, have traveled to Europe, have read certain books, play a particular musical instrument, know how to play chess, and so on, with innumerable combinations. The transmission of information through some repertoire of symbols presupposes a degree of knowledge common to the transmitter and the receptor. A receptor may become progressively more adept at decoding the information carried in the symbols as she increases her level of cultural literacy, or familiarity with the symbols and information used by the transmitter.

We might also think of a particular kind of art work, such as a text, that is comprised of a repertoire of symbols where the message conveyed by the text is apprehended in accordance with the level of the receptor's knowledge, education, social background, and so on. The message grasped may also be a function of the reading habits, cultural facility, and general knowledge of a given social group. Thus, a given text may be perceived in one way by a preliterate child or an illiterate adult, in another way by an individual who is unfamiliar with the language of the text, in still another way by

an editor who examines the formal structure of the printed matter, or even in another way by a literary critic, and still another by an "average" reader. Also, a given reader is capable of altering her skills in a way that makes it possible for her to grasp a variety of repertoires, and of increasing her capacity to apprehend intelligible messages.

Both Richard Wollheim and Ernst Gombrich take note of the influence of extrinsic knowledge upon aesthetic perception:

'What strikes us as a dissonance in Haydn', Gombrich writes, 'might pass unnoticed in a post-Wagnerian context and even the *fortissimo* of a string quartet may have fewer decibels than the *pianissimo* of a large symphony orchestra.' Again, Gombrich cites Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* which, he says, in the context of Mondrian's art is certainly expressive of 'gay abandon'" but would have a quite different emotional impact on us if we learnt that it was by a painter with a propensity to involuted or animated forms, e.g., Severini.¹⁰¹

Gombrich and Wollheim agree that knowledge and interpretation are features of even the most elemental apprehension of art, particularly cases where, for example, we are given two dimensions, but apprehend three, or when we interpret paint strokes as blades of grass, or fur, or eyelashes.¹⁰² While Gombrich and Wollheim limit the scope of ancillary knowledge with respect to the interpretation of an art work, believing only that knowledge specifically about art is relevant, we can go further and describe aesthetic

¹⁰¹ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 57.

¹⁰² Wollheim, 66.

apprehension as perception that is in all cases heavily affected by and informed by experience and information that is not essentially aesthetic. Aesthetic perception is ultimately inseparable from non-aesthetic aspects of existence.

The function of the various artistic symbols is to stimulate the imagination to the point of grasping some underlying emotional, moral, or intellectual content. This claim is significant because the meaning of a particular text may vary depending on the reader's ability to grasp the information encoded in the work. When we speak of the informational content of an artifact, we refer to that which makes possible the exchange of ideas, concepts, orders, and beliefs between individuals. Informational content depends on relationships between individuals and varies according to certain abilities on the part of the receptor. Such features as familiarity with the object, mnemonic capacity, and sociological background often figure into the receptor's ability to apprehend the information contained in a work.

When we speak of the informational content of a work of art, it is worth asking whether we can ever possess the full range of information given through an artwork. It would seem that if this were possible, we could code the information or message into a shorter symbol, such as a title of a work, the call number of a book in a library, or the opening bars of a symphony, or perhaps a certain position of the feet to indicate a particular work of dance. While the informational content of an art work is often coded or reduced, the full extent of what is symbolized is never fully given to us in the

abbreviated form. We rarely exhaust the information conveyed by a work of art, simply because of the limits of memory, perception, and the inability to assimilate all of the perceptual elements of a work. However, in extreme examples of this encoding, such as repetitive musical introductions to television shows and musical accompaniments to television advertisements, the effect is one of triteness. Think, for example, of beloved and familiar works of classical music used to accompany television or radio commercials for clothes soap, the maddening familiarity that accompanies the repeated viewing of the commercial, and the banality that results from such misuse of the art work.

Messages imparted by the text sometimes vary in meaning and are distinguished by relative levels of semantic and aesthetic content.¹⁰³ Every message displays some measure of both kinds of content. What this means is that there are two types of collections of symbols in an artwork, with two sets of integrated structures, often organized in original ways. Both convey information, but information of different sorts. Semantic information is formal, structured, and translatable. Aesthetic content is grounded on states of knowledge common to the artist and spectator and is largely untranslatable, which is to say the information conveyed aesthetically can not be transferred to another set of symbols.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ This distinction is similar to Goodman's four "symptoms of the aesthetic". Cf. Goodman's *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 1976)

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion of this distinction, see Chapter 5 of *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception* by Abraham Moles; Joel E. Cohen, translator (Urbana: University of

We see then, that an art work presents dual symbolic messages: semantic and aesthetic.¹⁰⁵ We may think of a message as some connected series of elements drawn from a store of symbols that conveys some set of data. A spectator may understand the message if he or she is acquainted with the store of symbols used to encode the message. The store includes any number of individual symbols assembled in a way that is decipherable or known to the spectator. For example, the letters on a printed page may represent some collection of individuals that are the same as those included on other pages, but the information conveyed by the symbols goes beyond the letters. The set of all letters, for example, comprises the symbolic repertoire, but the particular combination of letters conveys information that goes beyond the individuals of the repertoire. So, individual letters may be combined into words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs with formal structures, such as grammars that govern the combination of words into sentences and paragraphs.

Grounded upon the symbolic repertoire, the semantic content of a work is the universal, objective, and familiar structure. It is usually utilitarian and purposive. The most important feature is that it is always logical. It uses the symbols and laws of logic common to all languages and is thus translatable. Because it is translatable, the

Illinois Press, 1966)

¹⁰⁵ We might also postulate a third message beyond the semantic and the aesthetic and suppose that art works also conveys emotional messages. For the purpose of this argument, we will ignore this possibility.

propositional functions that are expressed may be true in different media: print, pictures, cinema, etc. For example: a picture can convey the information that a bridge with a car traveling across it collapsed. The account in a newspaper, with approximately the same propositional content, might read, "A car, travelling across an ancient bridge, was thrown into the water when the bridge collapsed under its weight." A cinematic portrayal might show the car driving onto a bridge and the structure giving way and plunging the car into the icy depths of the river below. The semantic content of the account is translatable with very little difference in meaning.

Such is not the case with aesthetic content. The aesthetic content of an art work is specific to its medium and does not admit of translatability. The aesthetic import of a symphony can not even be approximately portrayed by a photograph, or even a masterful painting. Nor can the meaning of a poem by Goethe be conveyed by a master animator or cartoonist. Aesthetic content admits only of transposition, approximation, and vague description.

While aesthetic and semantic content in the work of art are independent in that they obey different sets of rules and conventions, they are materially connected and contrast and juxtapose one another through the various elements in the work of art. The semantic content may be rigid or flexible and the aesthetic content may be more or less intricate and rich in content.

For example, the semantic content of speech varies with the use to which it is put. Hence, conversational speech is weighted heavily toward semantic content, and we find an emphasis on logic, grammar, and sentence structure while the aesthetic content is generally light. Poetry, on the other hand, is weighted heavily with aesthetic content with less emphasis on semantic content. So, for example, accent, syllabic stress, rhythm, vocal modulation and speed become more important than semantic elements.

On the other hand, "pictures," to use a broad term for paintings and photographs, may exhibit semantic elements such as subject, the relationship of objects, perspective, and anatomy. The aesthetic content may be comprised of some aspect of style, the juxtaposition of and dominance of colors and objects, and perhaps techniques such as the use of brush strokes, dots, or the elongation of figures in order to achieve a desired effect.

Theatrical productions also exhibit this counterpoint of semantic and aesthetic elements. The premise of the play, the plot, the story, the grammatical structures together comprise the semantic structure. The aesthetic may be expressed by the movements of the actors, their tone of voice, their facial expressions and gestures. Also, the sartorial combinations and the simplicity or elaborateness of sets combine to impart aesthetic impressions. All of these convey something beyond the given set of symbols to generate some state of mind in the spectator or receptor. For example, we might think of the admirable unity of drama and music in a Mozart opera where the transposition of key may express inconsolable, unrelieved grief and human impoverishment as we find in *Don*

Giovanni or in the music by Verdi in *Rigoletto* where the melody, the key, and the rhythm combine to express the sobbing of a human voice.

However, music generally has slight semantic content. What semantic content music does impart generally involves fairly complex and rigid features such as the score, the notation, which may include trills, pizzicato, and legato, and such melodic and harmonic features as polyphony, and directions for the orchestration of a work. Duration and pitch, resolution of chords and reversion to tonic chords also contribute to semantic content.

Despite this semantic rigidity, the primary information conveyed is largely aesthetic. We find the range of aesthetic information to be enormous and exceeds the information provided through strictly semantic features. While the history of music has been one of progressive attempts to structure and codify musical notation, musical structure is nevertheless encoded in musical scores that are only approximations of the work intended by the composer. A musical performance is tantamount to a collaborative effort between composer and performer or conductor. Every performance is an interpretation of the score. Even in cases where the performer or conductor exerts great effort to reproduce the composer's intention authentically, there is variation in the capacity of the performers, from vocal timbre to virtuosity on an instrument, to differences in the construction of instruments. All of these affect tonality. Something as simple as the

distribution of instruments in an orchestra varies from one performance to the next and the concert hall is itself an acoustical device that figures into the performance.¹⁰⁶

Dance is an art that, even more than music, has comparatively slight semantic content. Advances have been made in this century to notate and preserve choreography. Usually the semantic repertoire includes such elements as the timing and the steps and certain elementary movements and positions. But, dance as an art employs an enormous range of symbols that can not be notated, such as the interaction of light and shadow, the energy between the dancers, combination of colors and fabrics. The combination of gesture, bodily movements, and music combine to present an aesthetic message that goes beyond the given symbols.

The aesthetic and semantic content of most works of art involve complex messages that are expressed simultaneously, using several modes of expression. Theater, for example, presents auditory, spoken and visual messages at the same time. In some arts, certain messages are more prominent or important than others. In music, for example, when one attends the symphony, the visual message is of far less importance than the auditory message. In dance, however, the auditory and visual messages are of equal importance.

A question we might ask, then, is why do we find some works of art engaging even after, for example, we memorize all of the words of *King Lear*, yet go back to the theater

¹⁰⁶ See Mole, 139, for statistical studies of the length of different parts of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* under various conductors, along with variations in tempo..

to see it performed again and again? The reason is that the aesthetic content is rich. Even if we memorize and draw the semantic content out completely, we find that the aesthetic density is greater than we can grasp even when we are given multiple opportunities to assimilate it. We address the work of art many times, just in order to reduce the phenomenological content of the work and to assimilate the information that is encoded in it.

Aesthetic information, then, transcends the available collection of symbols to create a desired impression or experience. Aesthetic content influences internal states of mind and does not correspond rigidly to the symbols used to express it. On this analysis we can explain a subject's fascination with a particular work and will go to a museum to experience the same painting, or read the same book, play, or poem over and again. The aesthetic message is not exhausted by repeated perception of the art work. The aesthetic realization of the work exceeds the given symbol or collection of symbols. As Abraham Moles says: "The peculiarity of the work of art is that its richness transcends the individual perceptual capacity."¹⁰⁷

We may infer from this that one of the features of great art is the density of aesthetic information encoded in the work. When aesthetic information exceeds the subject's perceptual capacity, he or she is drawn to the work again and again. It is a fascinating note about musical performances that the public comes to hear what it already

¹⁰⁷ Moles, 166.

knows. Patrons of symphonies tend to reject experimental music and music with which they are unfamiliar. They come to hear what they have already heard before. Novelty is only a part of the attraction. Yet, we do not want to see art that is banal. This is another problem with art that is misused and repeated mindlessly in the media, as mentioned before; it becomes commonplace and trite. Yet, as Moles, shows, novelty or originality conforms to unintelligibility. We have to have some familiarity with the semantic and aesthetic contents in order to find a work intelligible. This may be one reason that Moles, in experimental studies, found high rates of statistical redundancy in a work of art, especially musical works, where it is customary for thematic presentations to be repetitious and varied in order to bring down the level of novelty or unpredictability and render the music familiar to us as we listen to the work. A work, to be intelligible, must exhibit features that are familiar in order for us to apprehend its novelty.

III.

Aesthetic content of a work, which induces a state of mind or an impression is capable of exceeding the informational content of purely semantic aspects of a work. Yet, it is the aesthetic content that expresses information making it possible to connect art and other social processes in a culture. Art, created under historical and cultural conditions, tends to preserve and impart the artist's vision of these influences to others. As an organ

of human communication, art makes possible shared perceptions of the world, cross-culturally and across time. Art contributes to mutual understanding among people divided by social, national, historical, religious, and ideological prejudices and distinctions. Art can bridge the divisive elements of human society and unites people for the solutions of the great human demands that confront all people.

For example, Goethe, aware of this aesthetic content in literature, realized that he lived in an age when artistic development anticipated a global or universal process of unifying literature. He once said:

I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere, and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men.... National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.¹⁰⁸

Along these lines, another German scholar, Fritz Strich, noted that world literature is, for Goethe, akin to literary space in which poets and writers of different nationalities can be heard speaking to all the peoples of the world.¹⁰⁹

In order to illustrate his thesis, Goethe identified stages in the evolution of art:

1. Mythological: the development of symbols to convey meaning and mythical creatures to facilitate interpretation of human events.

¹⁰⁸ John Oxenford, translator, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1930) 165-166.

¹⁰⁹ F. Strich, *Goethe und die Weltliterature* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1957) 59.

2. Classical antiquity: the development of images and ideas common to all humans
3. Medieval: unity in art is provided by dominant religions
4. National: art frees itself from the overview of religion, develops in conjunction with a national language and the national and cultural self-realization of a group of people
5. World: the state of art where there develops an artistic need to go beyond the limitations of national and cultural boundaries.

With respect to these stages, Goethe saw Romanticism as an artistic movement that supplied an interest in other cultures, especially their peculiarities and differences. Anticipating Hegel, Goethe saw art as a vehicle for interaction at a universal, or at least a global, level and a mode of affirmation of human, as opposed to cultural, social, or national, values. World culture is the end of this evolutionary drive and is based on the unity of and interaction of all cultures.

Goethe thought that, in virtue of this universal or global art, the artist would be able to reveal the essential nature of humanity by examining human relationships. We would think that this investigation into the nature of our humanity would result in the merging of art from different areas of the world. This is exactly what Goethe did when he presented a Europeanized version of Persian mystical poetry, an instance of universalized art.

He envisioned a universal art that could facilitate the exchange of spiritual and cultural values across individual and collective boundaries; an artistic transcendence of temporal and cultural limitations. Goethe thought that when we reach the point where we view art as synthesis of universal human values, we must evaluate art in terms of the values expressed in the work. We may not justifiably apply undifferentiated criteria to the works of artists everywhere; rather we must rely on a criterion of universal humanity expressed through art and as it applies to all people everywhere.

This leads us to suppose that there is a relationship between art and thought that is at least as ancient as that between language and thought. At one time, a certain view about the relationship between language and thought predominated—the view that language is simply an agent of transmission for thought. Current research makes it clear, however, that language is not a passive vehicle for thought, rather, language and thought are symbiotic aspects of human communications. Words without thoughts are little more than the sounds that we find in the world around us. Sometimes, according to these theories, we may have thoughts that we find too vague or ambiguous to express in words, but thought requires language.

Although not without his critics, Benjamin Whorff, who pioneered linguistic and cultural research, says:

When linguists became able to examine, critically and scientifically, a large number of languages of widely different patterns, their base of reference was expanded; they experienced an interruption of phenomena hitherto held

universal, and a whole new order of significances came into their ken. It was found that the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas....We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.¹¹⁰

Whorff believes that our thoughts are shaped by the language we speak. He supports his hypothesis with intriguing examples from the Zulu culture--for instance, where the Zulus have words for red cow and white cow, but do not have a word for 'cow'. Without such a word, the Zulus do not have a corresponding abstract concept for the category 'cow'. Researchers find further examples among aborigines in South America who have words that distinguish various kinds of parrots and palms, but do not have a concept for 'parrot' or 'palm tree'.

But what about those thoughts that are vague and somehow out of the reach of our linguistic capacity? This is one of the functions for art even among ancient humans. It is apparent that even in the dawn of early man, art functioned as a way of expressing the desire and will of *Cromagnon*, when he painted the herds of animals he wished to hunt and overpower. Art expresses certain vagaries and abstractions that escape semantic ordering.

¹¹⁰ Benjamin Lee Whorff, John B. Carroll, editor, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1956) 212-214.

It is an expression of those desires, beliefs, and longings of the human spirit that defy linguistic codification. Art is the voice of our species.

We also see art function as a historical, cultural and political instrument when the values and tastes of predominating classes within a society dictate status or the popularity of works of particular artists. For example, in the contemporary art world, certain classes or groups of people, such as art critics, academics, museum curators and gallery owners generate certain accepted aesthetic judgements. But, Pierre Bourdieu notes (in "The Aristocracy of Culture," in *Media, Culture and Society*) that aesthetic preferences are often class-based, such that the highly educated tend to prefer Bach preludes and fugues and the less educated tend to prefer Strauss waltzes.¹¹¹

Thus, conveying aesthetic content, art gives voice and comprehension to some of our deepest, often unarticulated, human values, especially in terms of the universal features of human life. If we take art to be a natural symbol of culture, the artistic experiences of one culture may be interesting and instructive to the people of another culture. Not only does art link individuals across history and across cultures, it provides a link between various modes of social consciousness that we find extant in a society at any time. Art is significant with respect to a world view. It crosses over various views of the world that are exemplified in the social structure of any community of people. The aesthetic content of art enables it to function in ways that allow it to span these various

¹¹¹ V. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture," in *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader* (London: Sage, 1981), 167.

social projects. It functions as a search for understanding values and reality, the grounds and concepts that express the fundamental beliefs of a society; it functions cognitively as it provides knowledge of the world about us; it functions as a sociology as it reveals our attitudes to others as part of a society, a culture, and as a nation; it has links to morality insofar as it is a study of individual conduct; and, just as Plato feared, it is political as it expresses political views. The work of art is grounded on its portrayal of reality, whether representative or illusory, including the prevailing morality, ideology, and general world view.

All of these may be revealed through the aesthetic content of the work of art. So, also, ideological content may be conveyed through the aesthetic content of a work because of the states of mind of those who create and perceive the work.

A work of art is a kind of microcosm: it reflects the world as a whole through its various media. Yet, in virtue of its aesthetic content, a work of art may be perceived differently by people in different epochs, countries, and even geographies, because of differences in personality, experience, age, education, and so on. Because of the depth and richness of its aesthetic content, a good work of art is potentially open to diverse perceptions and interpretations.

IV.

This is not to take the idealist position that the content of art is subjective rather than objective, which is to say that the work is constituted in the consciousness of the subject, the theoretical foundation of Kantian aesthetics. Rather, it seems reasonable to expect a spectator to approach an art work from a human standpoint, one that is molded by but not reducible to one's culture, nationality, and epoch, or other influences on a profoundly personal level. It is not possible to cognize art outside of the personal standpoint; although it is admittedly an altered standpoint, one that is universalized and emptied of self-interest. Yet, we should not lose sight of the fact that the personal and subjective apprehension of an artwork functions in the context of objective features of the work.

As it involves a synthesis of the subjective and the objective, the aesthetic content of an artwork, as we have seen, is a counterpoint of semantic and aesthetic content. The synthesis of subjective and objective, of semantic and aesthetic, of individual and universal, of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, involve the creative participation of the spectator in the perception of the work.

Thus, the content of the work may be objective, but the aesthetic apprehension of the work is mediated by the subjective, even intersubjective, standpoint of the spectator. Further, because it is objective, the content of the work is an object in the world, independent of its interaction with spectator or artist and any relevant interpretation of it. But, we must not err by defining a work only in terms of its objectivity; this leads only to

confusion. Art is bound up with experience. It is experiential and rides on a subject's, indeed a community of subjects', response(s) in the presence of an aesthetic object.

One proof of the objectivity of the work is its capacity for universal significance. In fact, it is this universal significance of aesthetic content that renders the work open to diverse interpretations, as well as historical and cultural relevance. For instance, Maksim Gorky, after reading Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*, said he understood his own stingy and mean grandfather, having read a description of Eugenie's father. This is not to say that he liked his grandfather more after having read the description, just that something he hadn't seen in his own grandfather was opened to him after he read about father Grandet. Art broadens individual perspectives. It gives something to us cognitively that is often closed to us otherwise.

The point of this is that both aesthetic experience and the artwork are social products. Art, while grounded in individual experience, is nevertheless found in the context of social institutions and interactions that are responsible for a work, that articulate it, define it, and help to give it its particular form. These institutions include museums, art galleries, recording studios, record companies, newspaper columns by art critics, printing presses, book publishers, radio stations, and even corporate earnings reports, as some Marxist philosophers so gleefully indicate. All of these elements figure into the finished work of art and bear some influence on the spectator's response to the work.

A subject is capable of any number of interactions in the world: with other subjects, with the environment, or with things and ideas in the environment. The subject does not passively enter into these interactions, but rather, actively participates in them; she undergoes certain modifications as a result of her interactions. The artist resides in just such an interactive environment and derives the substance of his work from the influences of his culture and society. We can say this even if we grant Kant's point that the artist's genius creates a new idea in every important work of art. The genius of the artist is to quicken our cognitions in a way that can not be taught by science or instruction and expresses and communicates ideas to other subjects. Kant thinks the artist is able to render the abstract and ineffable universally communicable.¹¹²

The artist's expression and artistic vision are dependent upon the essential feature of his or her social being. As a social being she interprets and integrates her experiences against the background of this integration and offers her art as an expression of her own vision in this social world.

While communication of his experiences to others may not take priority in the intentions of the artist, the audience is always a potential dimension of the art work. Art is a social and institutional product. As an artifact, art has the capacity to communicate because it expresses something about certain features of the world and because at least some of this communication is carried in the aesthetic content of the work. It is through

¹¹² Immanuel Kant, *Kritik of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, D.D. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1892), Section 49.

symbol and meaning that art unites human beings in a universal community of meaning.

As John Hospers says:

a work which has no effects on us means nothing to us, and whatever effects it does evoke constitute its meaning for us. As we become more acquainted with the work of art, the effects it evokes in us gradually change, but in that case its meaning for us....gradually changes too....Its meaning may or may not be describable in words—in most cases it is not, since few if any states of mind (particularly affective states) are describable to the satisfaction of the person who experiences them.¹¹³

The aesthetic content of the work is not subject to the kind of rigid regulating principles that govern the semantic content of the work, and functions as a less restricted mode of communication. The domain of art is the totality of life. Art serves to project, articulate, and interpret experience. Whatever the experience, it is the substance of art, transformed into an aesthetic offering of intrinsic worth and import. The product of art is nothing less than articulation and expression of the essence of the human experience. It spans the experience of generation and culture, gives substance to the ideals of human unity and intersubjectivity, and enhances our capacity for autonomous activity. I now wish to turn our attention to a further discussion of art and autonomy in relation to community.

¹¹³ John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1964) 75.

Chapter 4

Art and Autonomy in the Context of Community

One of the implicit themes we have unfolded in our discussions of the interconnections between art and autonomy has been the underlying assumption that autonomy and art are human expressions that occur only in the context of community. I now turn our attention to these interconnections, in part to gain some understanding of the ontological frameworks of human experience and intersubjectivity. In doing so, I draw heavily on Charles Taylor's discussion of identity and personhood that are relevant to my views about the interconnection between art, autonomy, and community.

I.

An undeniable feature of personhood is that we are creatures who are defined by more than our biology. We participate in a social reality that gives further ground to our being. A social reality that is a particular configuration of history, culture, family, and circumstance. As individuals we are defined by this social structure before we ever contribute to it. Human beings are a social construct. We enter this domain as passive participants, learning to become a part of the community as we enter into ongoing activities: languages, rituals, games, beliefs, traditions, customs, and art. We make

ourselves intelligible to others as we learn to participate in this community, to become members of the community. As we do so, we also become intelligible to ourselves. The public domain precedes the private and our reliance upon community is absolute, a message Wittgenstein went to great lengths to teach us.

Only after we establish ourselves in the public domain do we enter the private, where we learn to vocalize internally, to imagine, to experiment upon, and to extend the boundaries of our existence. We enter into a quest to become persons, even autonomous persons, as we interact with the world as it is given to us. This quest is a process where we learn to appropriate and internalize given ways of being human and to expand upon that process.

A great deal of what we are about as we construct our lives is to make sense of that process of becoming a person in a social context. Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self*, observes that in contemporary society, our sense of our selves is the product of our understanding of the good along with our understanding of our social bonds and relations. We understand ourselves against a background of four terms: (a) our notions of the good, (b) our understanding of the self, (c) the kind of narrative which allows us to make sense of our lives, and (d) our conception of society, which involves a notion of what it means to be a human agent among other human agents.¹¹⁴ The connections we draw between these elements contributes to the ideals we live by and the terms in which we see ourselves

¹¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) 104-105.

and make sense of our beliefs and actions. We make further sense of these elements of our moral construction as we learn to articulate them and to reconcile them with the suppressions and constraints of social life.

Making sense of our lives involves identifying the qualitative distinctions that contribute to our definitions of ourselves and to understanding our place in the social scheme; qualitative distinctions that give us reasons for justifying our ethical and moral beliefs. Taylor believes that a common mistake in contemporary philosophy has been to attempt precise distinctions between evaluative or normative judgments and so-called descriptive judgments. Hume called this the 'is/ought' distinction and G.E. Moore elaborated upon a version of this distinction, naming it the "naturalistic fallacy." The presumption was that the universe is value-neutral in the absence of human agents, and that non-evaluative descriptions of terms or events are coextensive with evaluative descriptions of terms or events.¹¹⁵ But Bernard Williams has shown that there are a range of key value terms, such as: 'courage', or 'brutality' or 'gratitude' that are unintelligible if we do not cast them as evaluative descriptions. The upshot of this point is that in at least some areas of human concern, "descriptive" and "normative" terms are inseparable.

According to both Williams and Taylor, in order to understand the meaning of value-laden terms, we must also grasp the social context that underlies use of such terms.

¹¹⁵ Taylor discusses this problem in Chapter 3, section 1 of *Sources of the Self*.

In particular, we require an understanding of the social currency that constitutes the common purposes and needs that define perceived obligations of people in a particular society, as well as some understanding of the people's perception of the good. That is to say, we can make sense of evaluative terms only against a particular socially constructed background of beliefs that is, for all practical purposes, just as real and just as objective as any observation of the natural world by science. This language of evaluation is a real and objective part of our world because it is an explanatory device that allows us to make sense of our world. Says Taylor: "What better measure of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives?"¹¹⁶

Our evaluative terms are indicators of what it is to live in the universe as human beings, and we err when we try to offer sharp distinctions between neutral descriptions of the world and evaluative or normative descriptions of the world. Admittedly, without human agents, there would be no evaluative descriptions of the world. Nevertheless, the reason these evaluations are more than just subjective projections on the world is that they are socially constituted, and as such, figure into the world as it is given to us, and not the world as projected by us. Our evaluations of the world are not mere projections, they are the very ground of our world.

¹¹⁶ Taylor, 57.

II.

A feature of contemporary society is the multiplicity of goods, particularly moral and aesthetic goods, which various individuals value and prioritize in different ways. The ways in which we organize and commit to these goods provide direction and structure in our lives. But, we are often confused about our own priorities and commitments, and one way to annul these confusions is to articulate and share our vision of the good in our lives. Our articulation of these goods also figures into the construction of our moral identities and the construction of our collective identities, our communities. These are the issues I wish to examine next.

As members of contemporary culture, most of us have moral notions about rational self-mastery, the importance of ordinary life and family pursuits, freedom, benevolence, the demands of universal justice, self expression, and expressive self-fulfilment, to name a few.¹¹⁷ Most of us are moved to some extent by these goods, as well as others not enumerated. Often we hold these goods in a hierarchical arrangement where we value self expression, family life, and justice more than, for example, self-fulfilment and benevolence. No matter how any one of us values these goods, we usually hold some

¹¹⁷ I am indebted to comments made by Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins at a seminar sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities at Utah Valley State College in May, 1997. Further inspiration for these comments comes from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, chapters 3, 4, and 25.

good or goods as of overriding importance, perhaps our relation to God or our commitment to close family relationships.¹¹⁸ This is not to say that our commitment to upholding these goods is free of dilemma or conflict concerning the demands imposed by our valuation of these goods, or our decisions about which goods override others in importance on various occasions.

Our arrangement of and commitment to these goods guide the decisions we make concerning the direction of our lives. We define ourselves in the context of them and make judgments about the behavior of those around us in relation to these hypergoods. Says Taylor:

For those with a strong commitment to such a good, what it means is that this above all others provides the landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives. While they recognize a whole range of qualitative distinctions, while all of these involve strong evaluation, so that they judge themselves and others by the degree they attain the goods concerned and admire or look down on people in function of this, nevertheless the one highest good has a special place. It is orientation to this which comes closest to defining my identity, and therefore my direction to this good is of unique importance to me. Whereas I naturally want to be well placed in relation to all and any of the goods I recognize and to be moving towards rather than away from them, my direction in relation to this good has a crucial importance. Just because my orientation to it is essential to my identity, so the recognition that my life is turned away from it, or can never approach it, would be devastating and insufferable....While all the goods I recognize, however much they may admit of lesser or greater attainment, allow for a yes/no question concerning the direction of my life in

¹¹⁸ Taylor calls these "hypergoods", p. 62-63.

relation to them, if I am strongly committed to a highest good in this sense I find the corresponding yes/no question utterly decisive for what I am as a person. For people who understand their lives this way, there is a qualitative discontinuity between this one good and the others; it is incomparably above them, in an even more striking fashion than they are seen as incomparably more worthwhile than the ordinary things we all desire in life; but I see the love of God or the search for justice as itself incommensurably higher than this fulfilment."¹¹⁹

These "hypergoods" are often the source of tension and conflict within a person and with respect to other persons, but most commit to some hypergood or other as a move toward a higher moral consciousness. In some cases people hold a hypergood in higher esteem than other goods of a society, and this hypergood may also be the basis of challenge and rejection of other goods. It is often the basis for serious and challenging dilemmas in our moral lives.

We often confront such dilemmas generated by a commonly accepted value in contemporary society; for example, the notion of universal justice or benevolence. Universal justice and benevolence is a value that encourages us to treat all human beings equally, regardless of race, gender, social class, or religion. Even if we number ourselves among those who subscribe to this hypergood, we realize we sometimes fall short of this ideal. Moreover, this idea has evolved over time from societies based on social hierarchies, flawed instantiations of the value, and by challenging various practices and

¹¹⁹ Taylor, 62-63.

beliefs that fall short of the ideal. As our acceptance of a hypergood becomes established, it becomes a standard by which we assess other goods in society, and it may also alter our views of these goods. Our view of these goods may extend beyond our own culture leading us to make judgments about the goods of societies of the past as well as contemporary societies.

Taylor tells us that our acceptance of these hypergoods is conditioned by a number of factors, among them our own histories. Our moral development may depend upon our efforts to reduce moral error and purchase epistemic gains. For example:

I see that I was confused about the relation of resentment and love, or I see that there is a depth to love conferred by time, which I was quite insensitive to before. But this doesn't mean that we don't and can't argue....and arguing here is contesting between interpretations of what I have been living.¹²⁰

The story of our moral progress as individuals and as societies often rests upon our ability to reinterpret the good, to assess it in a new way, and to progress in our moral experience. Very often this progress is generated by and facilitated by argument, by contrasting views, which serve to refine our moral positions. Taylor notes that our acceptance of hypergoods is not a moral move that we make in isolation. We are moved by hypergoods in "a complex way" and we do not "think of these things entirely on our

¹²⁰ Taylor, 72.

own and monologically...."¹²¹ This move is not a subjective experience, one that confers value upon a good, rather there is some qualitative discrimination that is involved in our seeing this as a moral good, something about it that is valuable and moves us to desire it. These goods somehow function as standards for us, independent of our own desires, inclinations and choices.

Such qualitative discriminations orient us to think of some things as important or valuable that govern our actions, emotions, and intuitions about ethical matters. Such discriminations are often at play before we are able to articulate them. These discriminations shape our moral practices, which may evolve in our lives, as well as over cultures and over time, as they express the moral ideal.

Unfortunately, qualitative discriminations and affiliated views of the good may be used to suppress and dominate other people. In obvious cases through history, the honor ethic that exalts the warrior with attendant fame and glory exalts men and gives an ancillary role to women, or minorities. Other views have proclaimed universal spiritual values that promoted inequality among people and the social exclusion of supposedly inferior beings. In our own day, contemporary social critics note that our modern ideal of rational disengaged freedom is a force that tends to foster the domination of a male or female orientation. This is not to say that all qualitative discriminations or hypergoods

¹²¹ Taylor, 73.

foster inequities and injustices; we only need to note that some stimulate social domination and injustice.

An antidote for such injustices and distorted visions of the good may be a heightened ability to articulate the underlying values and qualitative discriminations underlying these visions. We are all familiar with moral conflicts that turn on incompatible hypergoods, such as the demand of universal and equal respect coupled with the demand of self-determining freedom against the things we have to sacrifice in order to effect those hypergoods. Most of us struggle with issues that involve retributive justice on the one hand and the avoidance of death and suffering on the other; the conflict between reverence for life and our capacity to choose the course of our own lives; the demand for universal justice, beneficence, and equality, on the one hand, and the demand for personal freedom and self-legislation, on the other. Conflicts like these are the source of many contemporary moral dilemmas.

Moreover, in order to share our views of the good with others, to reason about such distinctions, we have to articulate them in some way or other. Taylor claims that resolving various moral dilemmas involves dialogue, but dialogue presupposes our ability to identify and articulate our relevant views of these hypergoods that anchor our moral views. Articulating our views is not only a social enterprise, it is a historical one. In order to understand our contemporary sense of the good, to glimpse values and distinctions that elude our awareness, we have to view it in relief against previous moral models. We

must search for ways to articulate our moral vision that include not only the historical moral enterprise, but the philosophical one as well. Underlying this project is the effort to conduct a kind of moral archaeology in order to disinter "...the great unsaid that underlies widespread attitudes in our civilization."¹²²

Contemporary understanding of our interpretation of the good and its application in our lives also affects contemporary articulations of the self. Taylor notes the intertwining of our identities and our moral orientations. We gain a sense of our selves, of who we are, within the context of our orientation to the moral goods and values in our lives. We associate different senses of the good with different ideas about human agency and the self. Thus our moral notions are inextricably bound up with our sense of the self. Says Taylor: "To trace the development of our modern visions of the good, which are in some respects unprecedented in human culture, is also to follow the evolution of unprecedented new understandings of agency and selfhood."¹²³

We delineate and articulate our qualitative distinctions in the context of certain frameworks. Frameworks that are the configurations of the beliefs that enable us to make meaning and sense of our lives. These frameworks may represent the intersection of culture, historical epoch, environment, experience, and so on. We think, feel, judge, perceive within these frameworks, holding some actions and modes of living as desirable

¹²² Taylor, 104.

¹²³ Taylor, 105.

and action guiding. One aspect of our contemporary defining framework is that our ability to express or articulate our values allows us to make sense of our lives.¹²⁴

As moderns, we tend to admire and respect abilities in individuals that involve, among other things, transformations of the will that enable people to dedicate themselves to others or to the universal good. We also value vision and expressive power. For some reason, says Taylor, there is some set of

ideas and intuitions, still inadequately understood, which makes us admire the artist and the creator more than any other civilization ever has; which convinces us that a life spent in artistic creation or performance is eminently worthwhile. The complex of ideas itself has Platonic roots, We are taking up a semi-suppressed side of Plato's thought which emerges, for instance, in the *Phaedrus*, where he seems to think of the poet, inspired by mania, as capable of seeing what sober people are not. The widespread belief today that the artist sees farther than the rest of us, attested by our willingness to take seriously the opinions about politics expressed by painters or singers, even though they may have no more special expertise in public affairs than the next person, seems to spring from the same roots. But there is also something quintessentially modern in this outlook. It depends on that modern sense...that what meaning there is for us depends in part on our powers of expression, that discovering a framework is interwoven with inventing.¹²⁵

Just as Plato identified a connection between the framework of our beliefs, our moral views, and the place of the artist in this network, other contemporary philosophers

¹²⁴ Taylor, 18.

¹²⁵ Taylor, 22.

also recognize the association between moral practices and art. Aristotle offers the place of music in moral education: "...music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young....There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms, which makes some philosophers say that the soul is a tuning, others, that it possesses tuning."¹²⁶ As we have already seen, Kant notes the resonance between the aesthetic and the moral realms. Kathleen Higgins argues: "Western aesthetics has become skeptical of the easy connection that most of the world makes between music and ethical life. In particular, the field's tendency to treat music [art] as autonomous structural object and to minimize concern with the holistic character of musical [artistic] experience...has obscured the experiential bases for recognizing music's symbolic and motivational roles with respect to ethical living."¹²⁷

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein says that ethics and aesthetics are one.¹²⁸ He sees ethics and aesthetics as areas of concern that go beyond the empirical

¹²⁶ Aristotle. *Politics*, Book VIII, Chapter 5, 1340b, translated by Benjamin Jowett. From *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Editor, Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941, p. 1312.

¹²⁷ Kathleen Higgins. *The Music of Our Lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 139.

¹²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963. Section 6.421. Also see his *Philosophical Notebooks*, 2nd Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, 83-86.

and the logical, that belong to the unsayable, that give us a global perspective that are part of the mystical and are of "absolute value".¹²⁹

Wittgenstein seems to make a distinction between what we might distinguish as vertical and lateral thinking. Vertical thinking is logical thinking, characterized by making judgments, by operating within the frame of reason, by codifying and developing concepts. Vertical thinking often depends upon memorization, and utilizing fixed conceptual models and sequences of ideas, as well as established and existing relations. Lateral thinking, on the other hand, operates on the margins of reason. Lateral thinking involves new ways of thinking about things, original thinking, the ability to make intuitive jumps and steps (I hesitate to call them inferences) that are not logically or rationally based. Lateral thinking is often a vehicle for establishing new relations and meanings. Both kinds of thinking are necessary to human functioning and complement one another.

On the basis of this analysis, creative and critical thinking are inextricably bound together. What this means is that we can not be creative without at the same time being critical. Nor can we be critical without being creative. Like an ethical judgement, an aesthetic judgment, or an artistic act, is a critical judgment about the world. Ethical and aesthetic judgments are intersections between the given and the possible. Both are creative and critical acts conjoining the actual and the potential.

¹²⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, section 6.45.

Along these lines, Wittgenstein, like Taylor, sees the aesthetic and the ethical embedded deeply and necessarily in a complex cultural background. We cannot isolate either endeavor. Just as ethics is a feature of our social, moral, political world, art is an aspect of that same world. To deny this is to risk fragmentation that renders only surrogate satisfactions through art instead of unmediated encounters with reality.¹³⁰

Taylor also recognizes that the Greeks approached life and ethics as an aesthetics of existence: a quest for a beautiful and harmonious life. The Greeks evince none of the modern malaise associated with the fragmentation and compartmentalization of life that we face in contemporary culture. They were strongly inclined to assess the good life holistically, as a unified whole. We recall Solon's reminder to "consider no man happy until he is dead". A person's life should be evaluated in terms of an organic whole rather than as a collection of discrete parts. So, for Aristotle, and even Homer, we get a sense that a disastrously inappropriate end would twist beyond repair the hitherto satisfying unity of a life. For the Greeks the study of ethics amounted to the search for a formula that would generate a satisfying and well-formed life that was maximally free of disharmonious misfortune. We see Aristotle establish one strategy for achieving this life by centering and contouring life in the web of an interlocking set of aims directed to a particular end.

¹³⁰ Arthur C. Danto makes a similar claim in his works. Cf. *Beyond the Brillo Box*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. Also, see *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, especially Chapter 1.

In short, the Greeks adopted an aesthetics of life. We craft our lives with an eye to unity, just as an artist crafts a work of art. “‘The Good life,’ the ultimate aspiration of ethics, requires the balanced and harmonious operation of these basic aspects of our beings....”¹³¹ The quest for the good was a kind of art of living based on general formulas and ideals rather than categorical moral prescriptions. This is the moral strategy Charles Taylor, among other contemporary philosophers, advocates. And, as we shall see, these moral aspirations are facilitated by the experience of art through its symbols and media.

IV.

We have seen that there is an interconnection between our moral aims and our identity. I wish to examine this connection more fully because both factor into a conception of autonomy. We orient our selves in moral space with our intuitions about the good. Our moral nexus constitutes us as persons, indeed, we are not without this framework of beliefs. We are unable to function at all without some sort of moral background assumptions in place.

One feature of the moral aesthetic is that we aspire to the good, the beautiful, the sublime. The “most basic aspirations of human beings [involve] the need to be connected to, or in contact with, what they see as good, or of crucial importance, or of fundamental

¹³¹ Higgins, 5.

value."¹³² In other words, we seek meaning in our lives; meaning that is constituted by and constitutive of the conformation of our values, goods, and hypergoods. These goods and values may vary from one person to the next, as well as from one culture, temporally and geographically, to the next, but what does not vary is our concern with some web of these issues. So our identities may be ordered by our arrangement of values and goods, depending upon our historical and cultural environment, but the fact remains that our identities are defined by our moral and spiritual orientation.

Our aspiration to live in the context of the good also gives meaning and direction to our lives. We assess our lives with respect to our movement toward or away from the good. The movement, or lack of it, can motivate some of the most intense conflicts in our lives. Yet, the point is that our fundamental motivations govern who we are. It is a basic feature of human existence--that we are never defined as what we are, because we are creatures in a constant state of flux, of changing and becoming. We become who we are over time, through infancy and childhood, into more or less autonomous agents, taking our places with respect to the good. Our lives have direction, an inescapable feature of meaningful human life.

Thus, as we define our identities, we find these inescapable features: we are oriented to the good, this orientation is always changing and becoming, and my life itself is, as Solon implied, is an unfolding story. This becomes another condition of making

¹³² Taylor, 42.

sense of ourselves, of configuring our identities: "that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*....our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going."¹³³

Implicit in this discussion is the notion that our knowledge of ourselves figures into our identities. Charles Taylor notes that a distinction of the modern identity is the process of self- exploration and radical reflexivity that were foreign notions to the ancients, certainly before Augustine,¹³⁴ and a fixture of the modern identity after Freud. As we explore ourselves we establish our identity, the assumption behind these explorations being that we do not already know who we are. It amounts to a quest for discovery.

Self-knowledge becomes the path to self-acceptance. When we understand the limits of our own existence, we also locate ourselves in the world. For Taylor, we may

...seek self-knowledge, but this can no longer mean just impersonal lore about human nature as it could for Plato. Each of us has to discover his or her own form. We are not looking for the universal nature; we each look for our own being. [This is a kind] of reflection which is intensely individual, a self-explanation, the aim of which is to reach self-knowledge by coming to see through the screens of self-delusion which passion or spiritual pride have erected. It is entirely a first-person study, receiving little help from the

¹³³ Taylor, 47.

¹³⁴ Taylor discusses this feature of identity in Chapter 10 of *Sources of the Self*.

deliverances of third-person observation, and none from
'science'. "¹³⁵

V.

Various philosophers and social scientists postulate theories about the working of society. Some, such as Hobbes, Rousseau, Condorcet, the latter two products of the French Enlightenment that stresses a rationalist approach to the world, see democratic and free societies as the result of collective and contrived activities. They construct theories about social design, usually proposing a scenario of intelligent human beings coming from a state of nature and entering into a social contract that fosters equality and the protection of individual freedom. Historically, this theoretical base grounds modern totalitarian democracies. Other thinkers, such as Adam Smith, Hume, Montesquieu, and some Scottish philosophers reach a different conclusion. Theirs is an essentially empiricist approach that finds the ground of freedom in spontaneity and the absence of coercion. What is more, they see the origin of institutions in a free society not as the result of contrivance or design, as the Rationalists do, but as the result of stumbling upon them, by trial and error, by the serendipitous social development of certain principles. These Empirical philosophers stress the growth of the institutions of freedom, as well as of

¹³⁵ Taylor, 181.

morals, language, and law in the context of cumulative growth and it is only within this context that human reason progresses and operates successfully.

Friedrich Hayek notes that the Romans also had a concept of human freedom that is grounded on community. He quotes Cicero, who pays homage to the Roman Cato, who was discussing the virtues of the Roman constitution over other political orders:

[because it] was based upon the genius, not of one man, but of man: it was founded, not in one generation, but in a long period of several centuries and many ages of men. For, said he, there never has lived a man possessed of so great a genius that nothing could escape him, nor could the combined powers of all men living at one time possibly make all the necessary provisions for the future without the aid of actual experience and the test of time.¹³⁶

In the Empirical tradition, we have a body of social theory that views many of the traditions and institutions of free societies as developed on the basis of experience, under conditions that foster the long-term development of individual freedom, but at the time may not have been so understood. The laws and institutions that form the framework of individual autonomy are sometimes thought to evolve by a process of natural selection reminiscent of Darwin's theory in biology. On the basis of experience and dialogical interactions, social institutions and laws evolve that may not have been designed and invented to effect a purposive social order, but are the result of complex and random contributions of many individuals together and over time.

¹³⁶ Cicero is quoted in Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959. p. 57.

Our autonomy is a further product of the communal traditions and institutions that we inherit. The rules and expectations that govern our societies are both a consequence of and a prerequisite for individual autonomy. We are able to engage in an intersubjective environment, to make plans and act on our expectations successfully because other members of our communities conform to unspoken expectations about conduct and demonstrate a regularity in their actions that are a product of habit. These habits and expectations may not be coerced or explicitly commanded or directed. Rather they are conventions, often unconscious, unarticulated, and unexpressed, that govern and order social interactions. More often than not, social and individual freedom depends upon voluntary conformity to these conventions and deeply ingrained moral beliefs.

There is a distinctive view about this lack of coercion with respect to social convention and behaviors. Hayek argues that it is probably conducive to individual and social freedom that rules should be observed in most cases, but that the individual ought to be able to transgress those rules on occasion when he or she sees it as somehow worthwhile.¹³⁷

Given the social nature of the individual, it is evident that we learn and function and progress in the context of other people. Our world is intersubjective and communal. Our knowledge and understanding can be won only when we as individual participants engage in and identify with the life of the community. Living in community increases our

¹³⁷ Hayek, 62-63.

possibility of accomplishing more than we might accomplish alone. To be a participant in a community of inquiry is to voluntarily engage in communal discourse with others. Such discourse may involve probing our logical, epistemological, aesthetic, metaphysical, and moral assumptions. From this, it is also apparent that reality is not given to us as isolated subjects.

If by "objective", we mean a comprehensive understanding of our world, an objective view of reality can not be adequately known by an individual seeker. Descartes was wrong. Objective knowledge is a thoroughly intersubjective activity, the result of human communal activity. We can see that objective knowledge implies a community that combines many insights and talents in order to arrive at some consensus, which is then tested against experience and recognized as tentative until some set of subjects assent to a proposition. From this we see that there is also no such thing as an objective knower, or a self who experiences the world independently of the social community to which she belongs. From an epistemological perspective, knowledge is mediated by our social and moral order. As individuals we are defined by and define the social structure. Just as from an ontological perspective, reality is mediated by language. At least we can say that language is intermediary between world sensed and the world effected. Without language, human behavior becomes nothing more than a matter of stimulus and response, and we become little more than animals. In our journey to autonomous personhood, we respond

to those around us, and we do this using tools that render us able to establish this bond with others--to communicate. .

When we say we know something, we presume that any kind of knowing depends upon the questions we ask, the kind of knowledge we seek, the assumptions we take for granted, the perspectives we take into account, and the context in which we undertake the inquiry. If Plato is right, and truth is the end of all inquiry, it also comes only at the end of infinite inquiry, by an infinite number of inquirers working together in a community that may stretch across time and culture. A community of inquiry is necessarily characterized by dialogue and this dialogue necessarily consists in an interchange between persons with different views, different frames of references. The higher development of persons stands on dialogue and a community of inquiry.

We saw above that our sense of self is a condition that involves articulacy, to use Charles Taylor's word. Articulacy is essential to each of us so that we may recognize our aspirations toward hypergoods that ground and stabilize our moral and social existence. Articulacy brings "...us out of the cramped postures of suppression...partly because it will allow us to acknowledge the full range of goods we live by. It is also because it will open us to our moral sources, to release their force in our lives."¹³⁸ When we articulate the goods of our lives, we have a better grasp on them. On these lights, art empowers. We see that art is an enterprise through which we make sense of our lives by juxtaposing

¹³⁸ Taylor, 106-107.

ourselves in relation to the meaning, value, and goods of our experience. Just as words often have potent moral force to express something within us, so art shares in this ability, often tapping into a source in ourselves that may have been previously unknown or felt. This is the reason certain stories have moral force. It may be that the affinity humans have for art is its capacity to articulate the unsayable, conferring meaning and substance upon the unspeakable. When we fail to articulate the meaning and values of our lives, we risk losing contact with it; in short, we risk dehumanization. Articulacy is a condition of personhood and, by extension, of intersubjectivity.

As a form of discourse, of dialogue, articulacy is a feature of our participation in a social order, a way of connecting and resonating with those around us. Dialogue between persons with different views and different frames of reference allows us to develop ourselves. This view is validated and justified on the grounds that we profit intellectually, morally, aesthetically, and socially when we engage different perspectives, illuminate existing social and political relations, and showing the deficiencies of one perspective rather than another as we shape ourselves and engage in the great human conversation. In order to resonate with reality, we necessarily respond to those around us. And we respond by articulating, through dialogue and discourse.

With respect to articulacy, Taylor points out that:

...the moral conflicts of modern culture rage within each of us. [Articulacy opens] us to our moral sources, to release their force in our lives. The cramped formulations of mainstream philosophy already represent denials, the

sacrifice of one kind of good in favour of another, but frozen in a logical mould which prevents their even being put in question.¹³⁹

This view of autonomous personhood is validated and justified on the grounds that it has the capacity to offer different perspectives, illuminate existing social, political, and moral relations, and show the deficiencies of narrow perspectives.

Art fits within this view of discourse with its offering of complex cultural projects grounded on theoretical and opaque ideologies that may be examined only from within the context of community. The skills required to interpret and appreciate art are socially acquired skills, accomplished only, as we have seen, within the context of a community of persons. Art is a system of discourse with its own semiological codes and structural terms. When we understand the formal features of art, we open ourselves to the possibility of understanding art as a body of discourse and to the methods we use to gain access to this discourse.

Moreover, art is the expression of an internal dialogue, which also presupposes community. Says Taylor, it is "through language [and art that] we remain related to partners of discourse, either in real, live exchanges, or in indirect confrontations. The nature of our language and the fundamental dependence of our thought on language makes interlocution in one or other of these forms inescapable for us."¹⁴⁰ We may change the

¹³⁹ Taylor, 106-107.

¹⁴⁰ Taylor, 38.

form or the locus of communication, but we can never sever ourselves altogether from a context of community. An ontological precondition for personhood is language and connection to others. Art is an expression of this longing for connection and is a vehicle for emotional connection to others that we can never derive from rational discourse. Higher levels of personhood develop as dimensions of various kinds of relations: authenticity is self-referential and one dimensional, autonomy is dual relational and two dimensional, but art, like language is triadic, three dimensional, dependant upon both the self and the other in the context of the world. Taylor elaborates:

Our "conversation" with the absent and dead is, of course, mediated by the works of oral and written culture, by sayings, sacred writings, works of thought, poetry, and works of art in general. These are originally conceived as figuring in a conversation. They are destined to be taken up and heard again or read repeatedly. The hermeticism of much modern art may make us think the contrary. But a reflection on artistic form might overcome this impression. All of our central art forms emerge out of earlier modes of social celebration or rite, be they tribal dance, liturgies, original Greek theatre, or sacred painting. I believe that further reflection and study would show that what we class as artistic form even today--that is, what allows us to recognize some collection of words as a poem or some pattern of colours as a painting, and the like--is closely connected with the property of encapsulating or revealing something (in principle) for anyone. In this way, they retain their connection with the original context of the most "primitive" art, a context of social enactment. One thing a work of art is in its essence...is a bit of "frozen" potential communication....¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. Endnote #15, p. 526.

VI.

Having examined the communal nature of art, I now wish to turn our attention to the idea that art is an expression of human experience. Once again, we find the ethical and aesthetic intertwined. Various ethical and aesthetic goods exist only insofar as they are articulated, and may not even count as goods without some form of articulation. Thus, our understanding of a good, anything that is valued, worthy, or desirable, becomes available to us both individually and culturally, only when it is given expression in some way. Moral and aesthetic traditions develop and change as they are given new expression and articulation. Culturally specific visions of the good are correlates of the different languages that have evolved within cultural matrixes. We are compelled to articulate and express our sense of the good because this articulation and expression humanizes us by giving our lives meaning and direction. Without such articulations and expressions concerning the foci of our lives, of the things that move us and direct us, our lives lack unity and meaning.

This is not to say that the purpose of art is simple communication. Such a view is simplistic. Nor is art simple expression, designed to elicit emotional responses. We can specify many possible purposes for art that go beyond cognitive or emotional content. To list a few: the apprehension of structure or form, the social significance of art, the display of craft or mastery (virtuosity), imparting wisdom, including moral wisdom, imitating

nature or human action, praising God or displaying the goodness or mercy of God, a component of ritual practices, religious or otherwise, and relaxation, distraction, or amusement. Very often, the purpose of art is little more than a strategy to get us to grasp or contemplate a particular object.

A peculiar feature of art is that our reaction (cognitive or emotional) arises spontaneously and not in response to the artist's intention to produce it within us. Our reaction must be our own doing and not one that is manipulated in us. An art work may articulate "...complex, subtle, and intrinsically valuable emotional or cognitive content. The purpose is not to create in us a specific attitude toward this content or to get us to recognize or otherwise react in any intended way to a state we are supposed to sense in the regarded artist...."¹⁴² Art has the capacity to frame experience, to point to certain stances that might otherwise escape us. But, says Dipert, while we may know that Dickens was greatly concerned about social conditions in mid-nineteenth-century London, we may nevertheless find his description of these social conditions laden with meaning and value, even if we do not take his concern seriously, or we ignore it, or even if we fail to have similar attitudes toward such conditions. Nevertheless, Dipert argues that the purpose of art is

to articulate, to put before our mind's (soul's) eye, to get us
to grasp or "relate to" some emotional or conceptual content.
With regard to propositional (cognitive) attitudes, the

¹⁴² Randall R. Dipert. *Artifacts, Art Works, and Agency*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 178.

distinction between attitude and content is relatively clean, but between emotional attitude and emotional content the distinction is less helpful. For one thing, some emotional states, such as moods and general feelings of well-being or dissatisfaction may have no clearly conceptualized content. It is an attitude, if we are forced to describe it....¹⁴³

It becomes ever more clear that conventional linguistic devices, even when we subject them to logical improvements, simply fail to successfully represent "...truly complex, subtle, or emotionally laden contents that we see in earnest normative, theological, or cultural/social phenomena."¹⁴⁴ Wittgenstein also recognized this limitation of language and saw that "forms of life" (Lebensformen) may be articulated only in art works and in life itself. Natural languages are inadequate to represent or to describe the emotional content of human emotion. He notes that Balzac was acutely conscious of this limitation:

The content of Balzac, what he was trying to get us to apprehend is not just that the human condition is complex and interesting. This content we could easily enough paraphrase. In other words, Balzac was interested in portraying in his monumental series of novels a certain kind of complexity of the human condition that requires...*all* of what he had to say and that if "translated" into a substantially different medium, such as a Venn diagram or a careful philosopher's paraphrase of the "point" of his novel, would defy human graspability. Since human graspability was his expectation and intention, no other

¹⁴³ Dipert, 180.

¹⁴⁴ Dipert, 185.

medium suffices. Consequently, we cannot describe in terms (much) more succinct than the novel itself “the” purpose of *Pere Goriot*—if we are going to specify precisely and accurately the “content” of what it is Balzac intended his reader to ponder.¹⁴⁵

One implication of this position is that some complex emotional or noncognitive elements are most adequately represented in media developed precisely for those purposes. Another implication is that translation from one medium to another (even from one language to another, if the work is generated in a particular language), loses the richness and depth of its original medium. The medium is integral to the “message” of a work. Thus, as Taylor and Higgins observe, Richard Strauss may write a tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, but even had it been Strauss’ intent, the music can never adequately render Nietzsche’s work.

We see that one of the purposes of art is to stock our minds with propositions, emotions, and other “higher-level” nonperceptual thought contents—with expressions of existence. Art crystallizes patterns of experience that pervade the range of human experiences, so that we can absorb them without having had to live through and learn them by a slow process of induction. Art gives us a range of experience we would otherwise never have had. It is a kind of accelerated experience machine.

But, art also functions as a kind of archaeology of our own human experience. If our access to nature is through an inner voice or impulse, then we can only fully come to

¹⁴⁵ Dipert, 184.

know this nature by articulating what we find within us. When we express something, we make it manifest in a given medium. So, observes Charles Taylor, I express my feelings in my face, or I express my thoughts in the words I speak or write. I also express my vision of things in some work of art, perhaps a novel or play.¹⁴⁶ A peculiarity of artistic manifestations is:

[the artwork] doesn't imply that what is so revealed was already fully formulated beforehand. Sometimes that can be the case, as when I finally reveal my feelings that I had already put in words for myself long ago. But in the case of the novel or play, the expression will also involve a formulation of what I have to say. I am taking something, a vision, a sense of things, which was inchoate and only partly formed, and giving it a specific shape.¹⁴⁷

Interwoven in the communal and dialogical nature of art, we should not overlook its ideological character. Modern cultures tend to insulate art from ordinary life, a tendency John Dewey and Arthur C. Danto decry.¹⁴⁸ There are several conflicting views about art, one aspect of which is the ideological myth, pervasive in modern society, that all art is good. We ensconce or present art in museums, theatres, or concert halls, surround them with formality and ceremony and generally insulate them from moral

¹⁴⁶ See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Chapter 21, Section 2.

¹⁴⁷ Taylor, 374.

¹⁴⁸ See: Arthur C. Danto. *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Also see: John Dewey. *Art As Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980.

assessment. We are indoctrinated to believe that what is aesthetically significant cannot simultaneously have moral significance, as in the "art for art's sake" movement of the last century. Our culture tends toward a mystical regard for art, viewing it as the repository of eternal truths that places it beyond moral judgments and censure. Carol Duncan observes:

...in our society, art--along with all high culture--has replaced religion (that is, among the educated) as the repository of what we are taught to regard as our highest, most enduring values. As sanctified a category as any our society offers, art silently but ritually validates and invests with mystifying authority the ideals that sustain existing social relations. In art, those ideals are given to us as general, universal values, collective cultural experience, "our" heritage, or as some other abstraction removed from concrete experience. Physically and ideologically, art is isolated from the rest of life, surrounded with solemnity, protected from moral judgement. Our very encounters with it in museums, galleries and art books are structured to create the illusion that the significance of art has little or nothing to do with the conflicts and problems that touch common experience. Established art ideologies reinforce this illusion. According to both popular and scholarly literature, true artistic imaginations transcend the ordinary fantasies that class and sex prejudices and the bad faith that beset other human minds. Indeed, most of us believe that art, by definition, is always good--because it is of purely esthetic significance (and the purely esthetic is thought to be good), or because it confirms the existence of the imagination and of individualism, or because it reveals other "timeless" values or truths. Most of us have been schooled to believe that art, *qua* art, if it is "good" art, is never bad *for* anyone, never has anything to do with the oppression of

the powerless, and never imposes on us values that are not universally beneficial.¹⁴⁹

This attempt to exalt art masks its force to influence people, institutions, and societies for good or ill. And it may be nothing more than self-delusion to claim that art has no force. Architecture certainly has the capacity to inspire awe and reverence and dread. We only have to think of the great cathedrals of Europe designed to instill awe and worship in the people; or the great temples and pyramids in Egypt built for the same purposes, but directed toward other deities. There are no end of institutions that build great and spacious buildings to subjugate and intimidate through awe and wonder so that people will not recognize that the institution lacks legitimacy. All of the trappings may be included: fine fabrics, brilliant colors, art treasures, marvelous craftsmanship, size, elegance, and expense. We have only to think of Hitler's massive building program in the days of the Third Reich where he admittedly had entwined social and aesthetic goals in mind when he built art museums, government buildings, and huge meeting places. This use of architecture abounds today with our ostentatious shopping malls, large bank buildings, sky scrapers, and government buildings to name a few. Elegance and pretension are often ploys and manipulations enjoined to mask institutions for the empty shells that they are. There are those who would use one of the high arts, architecture, to

¹⁴⁹ Carol Duncan. *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 118-119.

cause us to lose sight of the significant or profound, just as there are those who use architecture to help us to recognize the profound and significant.

For example, in the case of another of the arts, we have only to think of occasions when we were moved or energized by a particular piece of music. Music certainly has potent force in these cases, force that extends to generating relationships between people in an audience, or who vicariously join together through a recording. On occasion, music, like art in general, may also prompt us to examine our values and orientations. Kathleen Higgins notes "...music's capacity to engage our intellectual, emotional, and physical natures simultaneously, its suitability for promoting social cohesions, its reflection of practical and ideal modes of human social interaction, its ability to stimulate reflections regarding our basic values--consider the role of music in churches--all these are basic features of musical experience."¹⁵⁰

Higgins further identifies the cultural aspects of music that may generate alterations in our values and self-regard. Often the music of other cultures and societies reflect values that contrast ours and, when our cultural attitudes and values are opaque to us, may make them more apparent to us. Conversely, music and art may demonstrate the possibility of other attitudes toward being human, being a social creature that may encourage us to reevaluate our own.¹⁵¹ As we have seen previously, our own values may remain hidden

¹⁵⁰ Higgins, 4.

¹⁵¹ Higgins, 172.

from us, but the art of other cultures and civilizations can present a contrasting foil to throw our values into relief.

Art functions in another way that contrasts with the conceptual impotence of art. In modern Western societies, the artist often sets himself or herself against the conventions of his or her society. This is a feature of advanced contemporary pluralistic societies. In the Western European art tradition, the twentieth-century artist, in contrast to the more traditional artist of previous centuries often aims to alter the convictions of members of a society rather than to confirm them. The artist often intends to show the members of a society how things are "...so as thereby to awaken them from their somnolence or release them from their self-indulgent ideology, to illuminate them, or energize them into action, or console them."¹⁵²

VII.

Society often orients people to accept a sort of psychological conditioning process, not with overt propaganda, but through the consensus of conceptual habits. It is possible for language and value systems to obscure our real lives from us. Indeed a society's conceptual system often has a life of its own, abstracted from the real processes of the society. Roger Taylor believes this happens when a "conceptual system or language,

¹⁵² Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Works and Worlds of Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 362.

which derives from human beings dealing with the world, is abstracted from its sphere of employment and thence hounded with great logical precision for logical consequences. The inaccuracy that creeps in stems from a turning away from the real processes of the world."¹⁵³

So it is that many assumptions that function as part of our background beliefs are givens, not usually the object of exploration or belief. They are the ground from which we go on to examine and explore other issues that we believe or doubt. We rely on this background information, this social construct in order to navigate our worlds. Similarly, the social dimension of art is often masked, but this dimension is at least potentially a part of the experience of art. The relationship, especially in contemporary society, may be mediated by critics, institutions, auctions, and so on, but it is nevertheless fundamentally a social relation.

As an essentially social endeavor, art is created, displayed, shared, and remembered in social contexts. It articulates value, especially those values significant to members of a community, or a culture, or a civilization. These values may include, but are not limited to, living well, getting along with others, overcoming pure self-interest, being receptive to other members of the community. In doing so, art provokes analogical thinking and addresses symbolic interpretations that prevail within a community. Art serves as a mode of encounter with a world outside of us, a world of lived, social

¹⁵³ Roger Taylor. *Art, An Enemy of the People*. Sussex, England: Harvester Press, LTD, 12.

experience. At the same time it is a medium that empowers the individual with those tools that denote wholeness and greater capacities of reason, self-legislation, and acceptance of oneself--all qualities that one develops within a social context.

Again turning to music, Roger Scruton notes that a precondition of enjoyment of the musical experience, and, I might add, of art in general, is the existence of a community of appreciators.¹⁵⁴ Art, moreover, often generates community bonding, with music, public monuments, and aesthetic "events" the most likely vehicles for communal aesthetic experience. The communal nature of the arts is sometimes in itself sufficient to create a community, albeit a short-lived one, as Kathleen Higgins reminds us that Woodstock created a community among listeners not so many years ago. Works such as the Vietnam War Memorial create a community among its visitors, as do open-air band and symphony concerts.

As a social construct, language indicates, points to, or signals processes of the world and these processes themselves can not be categorized by means of static definitions because they are processes, a feature of an ongoing and changeable reality. Art and language are devices which we humans use to cope both socially and individually with a changing world. As we have seen, language and art are basic categories of the human world. What this means is that human life without language and art are unimaginable. Both are fundamental human dimensions.

¹⁵⁴ Roger Scruton. "Musical Understanding and Musical Culture," in *What is Music?* Editor, Ed Alperson. (New York: Haven Press, 1988) 353-354.

People connect with one another through time and across cultures through their artistic symbols and traditions. These symbols and traditions also connect people, along with the theories and practice of art, to the underlying theories, assumptions, and theoretical traditions within a society. Symbols function as culturally significant vehicles that represent a repressed complex through various associations. Thus, there is deep continuity between works of art and the symbolic expressions of ordinary life. Such symbolic, artistic expressions presuppose a code accessible to those whom the communication addresses. These expressions demonstrate the penetration of meaning within a culture by both expressing the inexpressible and by expressing the expressible more efficaciously.

For example, the moral force of *Guernica* does not derive from Picasso's attempt to depict a fascist dictatorship, nor to represent reality. The reason generations of people of all cultures are drawn to this painting is its expression of universal human emotion and fear, the bitterness and tragic suffering of imperilled human existence. Even when the memory of the historical event itself is lost on those generations who view it, the universal significance and reality of this work, the deepest cosmic truths, overcome the limitation of ideology and dogma. Charles Taylor makes the further observation that sometimes art transfigures the unthinkable into something the human mind can assimilate. One of the motivations of post World War II poetry "grows from the insight that to capture the most degraded or devastated reality in poetry involves a transfiguration whereby it can be

confronted, and borne without flinching by the human spirit....Finding a language for horror and destruction can be part of a fight for a spiritual survival."¹⁵⁵ The artist, if serious, projects something that he or she believes is there for all of us, an aspect of reality universally available, but gives it to us symbolically, through the lens of his or her own sensibility.

An example of symbolic expression is Jazz music. Jazz, as we know it, is the product of an intersection of cultures. But, it began as a subversion and a challenge to a dominant white American culture. The music came into being as a reaction to racial domination, in which culturally oppressed blacks did not, indeed could not say what they really meant. It originated as an expression of the American black identity that was decoded by other like-minded individuals. Jazz evolved as a symbolic expression, as a form of communication, that defined a community of understanders, a community of persons who were expected to grasp the symbolic expressions of the subculture, and who were in turn defined by that symbolic expression. The definition was reciprocal: what was a subculture defined by the persons contained in it also came to define those persons. After World War II, European culture assimilated the genre, with Europeans viewing it as a unique characteristic of American culture as a whole, and not as an expression of black American subculture. Thus, the European appreciation of Jazz grew out of its evasive, deceptive, double-dealing beginnings.

¹⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 485.

Another message we gain from the genesis and cross-cultural impact of Jazz is that through art, we may engage in imaginative associations in the context of ordinary life that offer possibilities for the ordering of human activity that is without threat or injury. Art in general allows us to explore our place in the world, to imaginatively explore various ways of being in the world and of encountering others. In the case of Jazz, a certain subculture of American blacks challenged their reality through the symbolism of a musical genre, and distilled another reality, one that ultimately rose above racism and subjugation. It is as if the Jazz musicians of the 1930's generated a new, racially unbiased reality through the music. Once again, we see aesthetic and moral sensitivities intertwine as related enterprises, giving credence to Plato's claim that "...musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill educated ungraceful."¹⁵⁶

The story of Jazz further attests to the notion that aesthetic appreciation is often class-bound and partial, especially as it is given to us in the dominant aesthetic theories of art in Western philosophy. That is, these theories view art as a kind of cultural possession that reinforces the distinction between intellectuals and dominant classes, on the one hand, and the dominated, on the other. To characterize the aesthetic disposition as

¹⁵⁶ *Republic*. Book III, 401, as cited in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*. Editor, Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 28.

"disinterested" and separated from everyday and practical concerns is an ideology that emphasizes the privileged conditions of a few and enables them to distance themselves from the demands of raw existence. This description aptly characterizes the musical division we find before World War II, when there was a great deal of disdain for and rejection of Jazz by American middle and upper-class white society. A popular aesthetic, however, refuses the criterion of disinterestedness, and working classes see the work as justified if it exalts and captures a reality of significance and importance.

It is through art that we determine what matters to us, individually, culturally, and communally. As a human endeavor, art, like science and language, is a way humans have of mastering reality. Art often discovers new areas of reality, making them visible or audible, where hitherto they had been outside of our grasp.

Ernst Fischer notes: "It is not the function of art to break down open doors but rather to open locked ones. But when the artist discovers new realities, he does not do so for himself alone; he does it also for others, for all those who want to know what sort of world they live in, where they come from, and where they are going. He produces for a community...."¹⁵⁷

And why is it that communities and cultures deem it important to express these real, important, and transcendent truths symbolically and artistically? We might wonder why medieval Europeans, (or modern adherents of religion, for that matter) wanted art,

¹⁵⁷ Ernst Fischer. *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach*. Anna Bostock, translator. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963. 210.

drama, paintings, and sculptures that expressed religious themes when they had first-hand expression of those themes in the Bible and related devotional works. Nicholas Wolterstorff thinks part of the answer is a human desire to tangibly manifest the meaningful and valuable. He says:

...one cannot escape the impression that there is in man a deep desire for *concreteness*, that there is in man a deep dissatisfaction with merely holding *in mind* his religion, the history of his people, his convictions as to what is important, and a passionate wish instead to make all this concrete, in story and play, song and dance, painting and sculpture. Aristotle sets us on the wrong track with his suggestion that the principle benefit of dramatic tragedy lies in the emotional purging we undergo by virtue of the fear and pity induced in us by the drama. Surely what above all gripped the Greeks in watching the tragedies of their dramatists was that there, before their eyes, were being unfolded the stories and histories so important to them as a people.¹⁵⁸

Thus, art is a particular instantiation of the universal, an instance in which a particular object carries universal import. As we saw, Kant had a limited vision of art's capacity to access the supersensible within us in the Third Critique, as an embodiment and revelation of the noumenal, the infinite. With Kant, we derive a conception of the artist and poet as seer, as one who commands the power of mystical awareness and vision. The transcendental is thus mediated through the artist and the medium.

¹⁵⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff. *Works and Worlds of Art..* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) 360.

Of course, we should not forget that one product of the Romantic era is the notion that the universe is organized according to principles that can not be grasped by disengaged reason. A further legacy of Romanticism is the view that the universe is essentially enigmatic, with the condition of intelligibility being full engagement in it. And this conception was a backlash to the Enlightenment, an era that viewed the universe simultaneously as void of premoral purpose and the locus of cataclysmic change.

There is an aspect to personal autonomy that becomes apparent through these endeavors. Art frees us by allowing us to transfigure degradation, disorderliness, ordinariness, and mediocrity. Expressivism, a contemporary formulation of Romanticism is the basis for individuation and self-definition. The late eighteenth century gave rise to the notion that each individual is unique, different, and original, and that individual lives are defined in the light of this uniqueness. Charles Taylor notes that the real import of this enhanced view of one's distinctiveness influenced our notion that our lives are original paths we forge according to the obligations imposed upon us by our individuality.¹⁵⁹ Expressive individuation has become one of the cornerstones of contemporary culture. Historical origins of these ideas may be found in the Christian notion of the variety of spiritual gifts with which every individual is uniquely endowed, expressed by Paul in the New Testament letters. This position was taken up again by the Puritans, who believed

¹⁵⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 375.

the good life for one may not match the good life for another and that each person has a unique calling which can not be exchanged.

Contemporary aesthetic theory reflects this preoccupation with Expressivism and creative originality. Art as a social institution is reinterpreted and given a central place in contemporary culture because creation and expression are increasingly central to our understanding of human experience. Art is no longer viewed as *mimesis*, as an imitation of reality. Rather, art is now viewed as an expression, a manifestation of reality that simultaneously realizes and completes reality.¹⁶⁰ The artist is both creator and seer. Art is the locus of this expression of reality, manifesting what is hidden or revealed in the world around us. Such expressions turn on the creative imagination which articulates the unsayable, the ungraspable. It is a feature of the human condition to desire to know, to master, to understand our world. Science has a place in this quest, as does art. Where science represents our best human efforts to unearth the secrets of the universe, it is art through the creative imagination that allows us to tolerate the unknown, the unmastered.

As Ernst Fischer eloquently puts it:

...man, being mortal and therefore imperfect, will always find himself part of, and yet struggling with, the infinite reality that surrounds him. Again and again he must face the contradiction of being a limited 'I' and at the same time part of the whole....Our aim is not unconsciousness but the highest form of consciousness. But even the highest attainable consciousness of the individual will not be able to reproduce the totality in the 'I'—will not be able to make one

¹⁶⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. 376-377.

man encompass the whole human race. And so, just as language represents the accumulation of the collective experience of millennia in every individual, just as science equips every individual with the knowledge acquired by the human race as a whole, so the permanent function of art is to re-create *as every individual's experience* the fulness of *all that he is not*, the fulness of humanity at large. And it is the magic of art that by this process of re-creation it shows that reality can be transformed, mastered....like Proteus, he [the artist] can assume any form and lead a thousand lives without being crushed by the multiplicity of his experience....our limited 'I' is also marvelously enlarged by the experience of a work of art; a process of identification takes place within us, and we can feel, almost effortlessly, that we are not only witnesses but even fellow-creators of those works that grip us without permanently tying us down.¹⁶¹

VIII.

Through art, we derive a vision of ourselves, as individuals and as members of a community. It is this vision of ourselves in community that I now wish to examine. It should be clear by now that there is a symbiotic relationship between art, morality, and society. They are intertwined aspects of our social beings, and expressions of one aspect imply related connections of the others. Our social and political structures and realities are reciprocals of our artistic expressions, and so on. These aspects may be encoded

¹⁶¹ Ernst Fischer, 223-224.

differently or offered in varying symbolic forms, but they are all manifestations of the same ideological structures that define our cultures and social realities.

One implication of this view is that there is no such thing as an apolitical artwork. The artwork inherent in various social and political orders necessarily expresses certain nuanced values, however obliquely. Art is internally connected with all other aspects of communal life. Changes in art theory indicate changes in other aspects of the social order and changes in culture or society give notice of changes in art theory.

Charles Taylor supports this observation, noting that alterations in the underlying moral vision of the nineteenth and twentieth century were related to changes in the theory and practice of art, particularly views about the enhanced powers of the creative imagination.¹⁶² Conversely, changes in the theory and practice of the arts also affect our understanding of society as well as our moral plight. A tendency toward “inwardness” is one of the trends we find in contemporary art. Inwardness is a corollary of subjectivism in which public access to the “cosmic order of meaning”¹⁶³ is impossible. In order to explore the order in the world around us and within us, we have to appeal to a kind of personal resonance. This ideal contrasts markedly with the ideal of disengaged reason that was the legacy of the Enlightenment. While this ideal has some currency, we err if we think it an accurate picture of human agency. The undeniable fact is that we are embodied

¹⁶² Charles Taylor. *Sources of the Self*. 510.

¹⁶³ Taylor, 512.

agents, living in dialogical conditions, inhabiting time in a specifically human way. We delude ourselves if we think that we are able to access a so-called objective reality. In line with this theoretical shift, we see a philosophical move away from portraying the human predicament in terms of a subject/object dichotomy, otherwise known as the egocentric predicament. Rather, philosophers began moving toward a characterization of human existence as a social construct. The product of language and dialogical exchanges between agents, language and discourse in general are not simply contingent and external to the agent, but fundamentally constitutive. This amounts to a Kantian analogue that our orientation in social space is one of the inescapable attitudes of our existence.

Another theory of social existence, based on Lockean individualism, places great emphasis on a view about universal and equal rights as well as on intimate relationships, especially familial ones. Both of these views give some prominence to the inherent dignity of human beings. Such a vision of human dignity combines the notion that others are deserving of recognition with minimal levels of respect. Discussion about universal, natural, or human rights that has great currency in contemporary society connects respect for human life with the notion of autonomy. And autonomy is crucial to our understanding of respect. Our notions of autonomy are also driven by the background pictures of human nature and the human circumstance of any epoch. For example, Taylor notes that the Enlightenment gave us a picture of humans as disengaged subjects, breaking free of our "comfortable but illusory sense of immersion in nature, and objectifying the

world around us."¹⁶⁴ The Kantian theory pictures humans as rational agents and the Romantic theory pictures humans as "developing, "flourishing," and "driven to self-expression."

Underlying these conceptions of what it is to be human is the notion that respect for persons appears to be a universal moral practice, with evidence of practices that accord with some such conception in every society. Taylor notes that in higher developed civilization in the West, respect for persons is generally articulated in terms of rights that are central to our moral and legal codes. Under modern interpretation, our sense of respect for persons turns on freedom and self-control. Respect for persons, combined with other connected moral demands such as human welfare and the affirmation of ordinary life, color our understanding of integrity and autonomy.¹⁶⁵ Since Locke and Mill, our understanding of autonomy lends credence to the view that in order to facilitate a person's moral development, we must respect individual differences, even when those differences lead to practices that we may find repugnant. As a result, contemporary culture places maximum importance on the expressive power of the individual. To respect a person's integrity one must also protect his or her freedom to develop and express opinions, to legislate the course of his or her own life, and to determine the essential meaning of his or her own life.

¹⁶⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

¹⁶⁵ For an analysis of the interconnection between these aspects of moral personhood, see Chapters 1 & 2 of *Sources of the Self*.

This conception also has consequences for a simple subjectivist approach to art. Subjectivism implies a narrow focus, one that is confined to the perceived reality of the agent. With subjectivism, we find a focus on personal mental characteristics or states that arise from one person's awareness of his or her own states and processes. Modern works of art tend to go beyond subjectivism to express what is universal to being human, and this is what makes art convincing and moving. For often, when we are deeply touched by art, we are drawn to those deeper, more general and universal truths that are inaccessible in other ways. It is art that moves and touches us because it expresses those fundamental principles that define us as humans. Concerning this notion of inwardness, Taylor says:

...inwardness is...a part of the sensibility of the modernist sensibility....And what is within is deep: the timeless, the mythic, and the archetypical that are brought forth by Mann or Joyce—or Jung, whose work is fully a product of the modernist sensibility....may be transpersonal. But our access to it can only be within the personal....[It] may take us beyond the subjective, but the road to them passes inescapably through a heightened awareness of personal experience.¹⁶⁶

There are virtues as well as dangers to the modern trend that emphasizes inwardness, and this trend becomes palpable in the art it informs. One consequence of this move is the contemporary issue of self-affirmation through creative imagination that is unique in human history. Charles Taylor thinks that the creative imagination plays an integral role in our view of the good in our world. The transformation of our stance and

¹⁶⁶ Taylor, 481.

our outlook help to bring about the truth it reveals. This means that the creative imagination helps complete what it reveals. Thus, our orientation toward ourselves, other selves, and the good does not simply enable us to recognize a good, rather, it helps us to bring this good about. Our developed capacity to see good empowers good, and as such, functions as moral source, according to Taylor. Concerned with the modern definition of the self, Taylor thinks this is a step on the way to internalizing our moral sources. This means that we no longer look for moral sources that are external to us. We are conditioned to look within to discover them. This ability has the effect of a self-affirmation, a kind ennobling of ourselves. Says Taylor:

Along with the sense of our dignity as disengaged, free, reasoning subjects, alongside our sense of the creative imagination as a power of epiphany and transfiguration, we have also this idea of an affirming power, which can help realize the good by recognizing it.¹⁶⁷

Since this modern view of the self turns on our sense of self-affirmation and our power to transfigure and interpret the world within, we no longer think of ourselves as dependent upon external sources for access to nature or to God. This is not to say that our understanding of this self-affirmation and self-realization subordinates all vision of art, personhood, morality and society to personal fulfillment. To do so would be to devalue other important features of human life, features, such as: community affiliations, obligations of marriage and family, loyalty to traditions and established social institutions.

¹⁶⁷ Taylor, 454.

We lose a great deal when we concentrate on self-fulfilment to the detriment of these defining relationships. Indeed, Taylor notes that when we place the demand of self-fulfilment over these other affiliations, we fail to sustain our connection and identification with the community that public freedom requires.¹⁶⁸

This connection to others is founded on a dialogue we enter into with them. Our lives are fundamentally dialogical. Dialogue is the substrate of all communication and stands for all elements of address and response between persons. When we think of dialogue at its most basic level, we think of face-to-face interactions between individuals who participate in a community of meaning. We find many patterns of dialogue: over distance as in e-mail or letter-writing; prelogical, as in a smile between mother and infant; prelinguistic, as in pointing and gesturing; indirect, as in art; thematic, as in various kinds of performance or directed activities, and so on. The point I wish to emphasize is that 'dialogue' encompasses the rich scope of human languages of expression and interaction, languages that include the language of art. All of these languages and interactions define us since we are initiated into this dialogue the moment we are born. We do not acquire these languages in isolation; these languages define us and provide the frameworks for our lives.

Because we are human, we define ourselves socially long before we define ourselves as individuals. Community is ontologically basic to our notion of the self and

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 35.

of human agency. Even our individual identities are established in the context of significant others. This development takes on paradoxical dimensions in our adolescent years when we flout convention and outgrow our parents' supervision. But, even this struggle to establish our individual identities, our efforts to free ourselves from the perceived constraints imposed by our parents, or our schools, or our societies, necessarily involves basic levels of interaction with those around us. We never escape this great conversation. Taylor makes this point in *The Ethics of Authenticity*: "...we are always in conversation, in some cases, our interlocutor is God, or an audience, but we are always within the context of the community."¹⁶⁹ Elsewhere, he says:

I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding--and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocation'.¹⁷⁰

We can not achieve autonomy without others, just as we can not create art outside of the context of community, and just as we can not reason without others. The ultimate criterion which establishes our autonomy is self-legislation and self-control, both dimensions of "reasonableness," and all of which we develop only within a community. We constantly establish our identities, and our autonomy, in the context of the natural

¹⁶⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. 36.

world and communal worlds. Autonomy is a kind of process that presupposes interdependent selves, selves who can detach in certain ways from some of the given traditions of their historical communities, perhaps. But selves who nevertheless define themselves in some community; selves who are somehow defined by communities.¹⁷¹ Community is constitutive of human agency. We are autonomous, even rational, in a social context. This point is often lost in the Western philosophical tradition harkening back to Descartes and Locke, with its emphasis on the subject-object dichotomy in their definitions of human selfhood and the conception of autonomy that rides on that distinction. But we are acutely aware that this picture of human identity is flawed because it neglects the relational aspects of the self. Kant and Mill both understood that this communal aspect of developed or autonomous personhood, a version of overcoming narrow self-interest, is a moral ideal and presupposes a desire to establish a sense of solidarity and community with other human beings.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor notes that our culture has encouraged and even demanded detachment from one's historical roots, that is, from historic communities defined by birth. This detachment derives from both Greek and Hebrew roots. For example, Hebrew prophets were often people who challenged the abuse of a community in order deliver God's message. Similarly Greek history gives us the heroic figure of Socrates who stood against popular Athenian opinion in order to rescue philosophical reason. Yet, these legendary figures were nevertheless defined by another kind of community--a community of like-minded individuals, that places these figures in relation to the language and visions of others. 37.

¹⁷² See John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism*. Editor, Oskar Piest. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957. 40, 42-43. Also, Friedrich Schiller. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Translator, Reginald Snell (New York: Ungar, 1954) 138.

Many of the values and goods of our lives are acquired only in the context of community, and art is one of those goods. How many times is our experience of a work of art, whether music, film, dance, drama, or architecture, enhanced or diminished as we enjoy them with others? As Taylor goes on to say, "The very form of a work of art shows its character as *addressed*."¹⁷³ Even though we sometimes think of the artist (or the ascetic) as a solitary individual, creating art in isolation, we must recognize art for what it is: a part of the great human conversation. Because art describes a social relation, at its most basic, it reminds us of our common humanity across cultures and across time. It serves to remind us that we are fundamentally human, in a world of human beings, in the range of human experience. Any mode of human existence that is narrowly subjective, that fails to account for either the demands of our relationships with others, or to demands that require us to reach beyond ourselves, to transcend ourselves, are destined to self-destruct. Autonomous lives are those that honor the ethic of our relationships with others as we live out our lives within a communal space, even while aspiring to self-legislation and some measure of control over the course of our own lives.

IX.

¹⁷³ Taylor, *Ethics*, 35.

Leo Tolstoy in *What is Art?* expresses the view that the purpose of art is to unite humanity into a universal community. He thinks that art has the unique capacity to unite human beings through evoking and communicating emotion. Tolstoy's was an early articulation of the Romantic rebellion against the tenets of Neoclassical art by denying the supremacy of reason in art and life and conceiving of the creative imagination as the ultimate human faculty. With the advent of Romanticism, as we have already seen, subjective perceptions began to be thought of as cognitively significant. The objective as the criterion and test of and source of knowledge was superseded by the subjective. One of the great contributions of the Enlightenment had been a move to validate data as universally and objectively true, beyond momentary subjective states of the individual investigator, whether mathematician, scientist, or philosopher. Tolstoy and the Romantics turned this traditional view on its head. With them, an exceptional individual, especially an artist, could serve as a conduit of truth. Indeed, the Romantics taught that it was precisely when extraordinary individuals gave expression to their most intense and personal emotional states that we might gain a glimpse of the infinite and eternal. While reason might yield knowledge of a common sort, artistic imagination was necessary to gain insight into the reality that escaped the senses.

A further implication of the Enlightenment was a stance that generated the subject/object dichotomy--distance between subject and the world, and the disengaged subject of Descartes and Locke. Some of the most significant and influential philosophical

and artistic discoveries of the twentieth century have been those that describe the subjective engagement of individuals in the world. The philosophies, from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Husserl, and Wittgenstein, for example, attempt to overcome the subjective/objective dichotomy which generated conceptual divisions between humans and the world, between logic and sense impressions, and between humans themselves. In art, the Impressionists explored the notion that we perceive the world in the matrix of structures we ourselves formulate. They discovered that experience is necessarily mediated and art is an instrument of interpretation as well as transformation. In the twentieth century art becomes a frame through which the artist and the spectator exercise the creative imagination in order to refract experience.

Art uniquely fits this agenda, to bridge the gap between public and private experience. This is Dewey's, Tolstoy's, Danto's, and Higgins' doctrine as well: art crosses the divide that emerges with our twentieth-century predisposition to fragment public, social, and collective aspects of experience from personal, private, and individually acquired experience. Of particular interest in our examination is art's capacity to align one person's thought, language, and affective dimension with those of another. As evidence of this, we have only to think of aesthetic experiences that involve intersubjective empathy and often shared delight, making the social connections between people apparent. We find occasions of this intersubjective connection when people come together in the concert hall

or the gallery, or even when coming together to listen to a compact disc or to enjoy a coffee table art book.

One memorable experience was the magical moment when my children and I joined a crowd gathered around a blind “blues” guitarist on a street corner in Atlanta. For a few moments at least, a crowd of hurrying commuters were transfigured into a community. This community lasted only long enough for the singer to finish two moving songs, but the crowd around him were united in their diversity and in their response to singer’s art. Art has an affective dimension that involves intersubjective empathy and shared delight and makes apparent the social connections between people. Kathleen Higgins, who focuses on the musical experience, observes: “Like any shared profound experience, listening to stirring music, which touches one’s sense of what one is, has a socially binding effect on those who share the listening experience. The personal differences that divide the members of the audience seem less serious than this shared intense experience.”¹⁷⁴

One of the great delights of poetry is its insights into the personal life and response of another. Through poetry we can come to know another not just as a perspective, but through a perspective we both come to share, even for a moment. We join in a nexus that intersects our points of access to the social order. These moments of aesthetic participation can generate friendships, but also engage the individuals concerned in interactions that transcend the experience itself. We see many examples of this in history and in our own

¹⁷⁴ Higgins, 152.

experience. As Higgins notes, music, in particular, "...can be employed to urge solidarity within a faction, it is almost uniquely suited to incite a sense of community among people who have little else in common besides appreciating it."¹⁷⁵ This accurately describes the musical event my children and I experienced in Atlanta, when hurried commuters entering a rail station stopped for a moment to chat and smile and commune under the unifying spell of an artist's humble offering.

On another note, I recall my oldest son's experience when he visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Here were historical memorabilia and photographs, along with sculpture, drawing, music, architecture, and painting designed to evoke emotional reaction and sentiments among the participants. One is certainly struck by the overwhelming grief and pathos the exhibits evoke, but once again, one finds that the art creates a community dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust victims and to a communal resolve to oppose such occurrences in the future. This heightened consciousness is, in many ways, a consequence of twentieth century art's agenda to emphasize self-expression and the use of symbols to express the inexpressible.¹⁷⁶ All of which gives us an increased ability to unite as individuals in community. Perhaps this accounts for the use of art in many cultural traditions as a vehicle to promote harmonious living. It is the very nature of the dialogue that is evoked by art that we are drawn together as a community, as it

¹⁷⁵ Higgins, 151.

¹⁷⁶ This is a point my young child touchingly noticed at age 12, but could articulate only in a childish vocabulary.

simultaneously enhances our individual abilities to discover, define, and legislate ourselves.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

If we search the history of philosophy we find the notion of autonomy, in one way or another, as the locus of presuppositions and theories about personhood and moral decision-making. In the golden age of Greek philosophy, we find Plato telling us that the highest development of personhood is under the influence of the rational soul, that pure and intellectual part of the self that acts solely on the basis of rationality. Centuries later, Augustine proposes a doctrine that the truly free person is one who subjects himself or herself to the rational part of his or her soul. Combined with this, we have Augustine's picture of the self as an inner domain revealed by turning our gaze inward. In a sense, Augustine encouraged us to *discover* ourselves, to plumb our own unknown depths and to thereby encounter God by looking inward.

After Augustine, we find the next significant doctrine of autonomy with Rousseau who discusses the collective expression of the general will as a community of self-legislating persons. Here, autonomy is an expression of the interests of every individual, the collective interest expressed in the context of community. This theme is picked up by Kant, for whom autonomy is the expression of a free and highly developed moral person, able to express the moral law by engaging the will. Kant stresses the concept of individual freedom as self-determination. Our reverence and veneration of the moral law is a

consequence of our rational agency, a status unequaled anywhere in creation. Only the rational agent has the dignity that comes from recognition of and willing adherence to the moral law. Yet, Kant's moral philosophy, while a philosophy of freedom, is open to the criticism that rational agency alone does not constitute a complete description of the moral agent, nor can the isolated agent achieve autonomy in a social vacuum. This is a point of which Kant was aware and which he attempted to rectify in the Second Critique. A variation on Kant's version of autonomy, self-government by impartial observers, later becomes the basis of John Rawls' theory. Even John Stuart Mill expresses views about personal autonomy in *On Liberty*, despite the obvious tension with his views about utilitarian ethics (although one might also construct an argument about the place of autonomy in utilitarianism).

Any search of the literature dealing with autonomy yields a notion of autonomy that appears to be a constellation of concepts and a term that is used in a variety of ways. Joel Feinberg echoes this notion when he argues that there are at least four basic meanings of the term 'autonomy.'¹⁷⁷ Current topics in the literature that deals with autonomy address a variety of issues such as: purported distinctions between 'autonomy' and 'freedom', the relationship between autonomy and free will, autonomy and justice, autonomy and paternalism, autonomy and belief formation, and so on. The discussions appear to have little to do with the traditional Kantian notion of autonomy, but many theorists

¹⁷⁷ Joel Feinberg. *Harm to Self*, Vol. 3 of *The Moral Limits of Criminal Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Chapter 18.

acknowledge their indebtedness to Kant for linking autonomy as a property of persons with their capacity to act on principles of morality and justice. But, discussions of autonomy also ground other, seemingly unrelated, theoretical issues in education, medicine, community and, as I have argued here, in aesthetics.

Gerald Dworkin has worked out an explicit theory of autonomy that rides on a distinction between lower- and higher-order desires.¹⁷⁸ Lower-order desires are those that ground the actions of an agent, which means that the agent has a desire to do either X or Y. Higher-order desires are those that ground lower-order desires, so that one has a desire to desire either X or Y. Something of course has to be said about the formation of these preferences in order to establish conditions for autonomy. It is entirely reasonable to say that these preferences may figure into the conception of personal autonomy to a greater degree than the acquisition of goods. Feinberg and Dworkin propose certain conditions of autonomy: luck, self-possession, individuality, self-determination, moral independence, integrity, and self-control, along with some logical and moral criteria. Susan Wolff proposes minimal levels of sanity foundational for ascriptions of autonomy.¹⁷⁹ Without diverting attention from the issue at hand, which is the connection between art and autonomy, it is clear that our conceptions of autonomy figure into the notion of persons

¹⁷⁸ Gerald Dworkin. *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) Chapters 1 & 3.

¹⁷⁹ Susan Wolff, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility," in *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions*, ed. Ferdinand Schoeman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

in social and moral theories, as well as our respect for persons. As such, the place of autonomy in societies is certain to contain ideals such as equality, human dignity, and the worth of persons. Personal autonomy gives us a picture of human existence as a meaningful and significant enterprise.

Charles Taylor makes implicit assumptions about autonomy in his discussions of the good life that center on authenticity and moral personhood. There are compelling reasons for making the case that autonomy is constitutive of moral agency, no matter how construed, that gives value to human experience. It is clear, however, that there is a kind of tension that arises between our ideal of autonomous personhood and our ideal of social life. How do we (or do we) balance our commitment to those principles that justify and regulate a well-ordered and self-sustaining society with our individual desires, reasons, and ends? How do we (or do we) control our own dispositions and desires in the face of efforts of a healthy community to socialize us, especially when a good deal of that socialization occurs during an individual's prelogical, uncritical stage of life? As Dworkin notes, autonomy appears to place us in conflict with our ties to others, our commitment to most principles, and our social institutions that engender respect for authority, tradition, leadership, and so on.¹⁸⁰ Any talk about procedural autonomy leads us to recognize the need for minimal levels of self-esteem, the ability to think for oneself, and the warrant to

¹⁸⁰ Dworkin, 12.

think and function contrary to the will and wishes of the group. Thomas Scanlon recognizes this conflict when he says:

...[an] autonomous person cannot accept without independent consideration the judgement of others as to what he should believe or what he should do. He may rely on the judgment of others, but when he does so he must be prepared to advance independent reasons for thinking their judgment likely to be correct, and to weigh the evidential value of their opinion against contrary evidence.¹⁸¹

Yet, it is in line with the great liberal tradition to construe an ideal of persons living in democratic societies as the very exemplification of communities of self-governing, self-legislating individuals. A fundamental normative value of democratic community is the commitment to foster and value personal autonomy equally among persons, and it is similarly the case that autonomous persons will contribute value and meaning to the life of the community, a lesson we learn from Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. These philosophers added momentum to radical developments in political and social theory by, for example, turning the locus of social contract theory (Locke) to the individual. They fostered the notion that a community that prizes individual liberties and rights is complemented by individuals who model autonomous development. Since political institutions arguably derive their legitimacy from its citizens, political autonomy presupposes recognition of and respect for democratic rights of participation. While there

¹⁸¹ Thomas Scanlon "A Theory of Freedom of Expression" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1 (1972) 216.

may be tension between the autonomous person and an ideally democratic community, it also seems that they sustain one another as well.

As persons, none of us is immune to social influences. All of us are conditioned to one degree or another to reside in our culture, our epoch, and our community. The argument I have proposed in these pages is that art, along with social experiences, helps us to establish our understanding of personal autonomy by making it manifest through some medium. This is particularly the case with the literary arts and film, and with music as well. As examples, we might think of the moments of awareness when certain protagonists intuit their own capacity to live their lives according to their own lights. We have only to remember Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, who spurns offers of marriage from men she does not respect. Henry James' heroine Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, refuses marriage to any suitor, at the risk of income and social position in order to live her life according to her own lights. Or consider Jean-Paul Sartre's protagonist in *Nausea* who creates art in order to lend authenticity and integrity to his own life. Finally, a roughly contemporary Frank Capra film, *Lost Horizons*, introduces a hero, Robert Conway, who risks everything he has in order to return to a community void of greed and dissent because he recognizes this as a place where he might "be himself".

There is another side to art's influence on personal autonomy. Not only does it demonstrate fictitious (or non-fictitious) events that contribute to a character's personal

integration, but it may also influence the spectator to interpolate the same principles into his or her own life. For example, Nora, the housewife in Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, faces a choice between remaining in a marriage of bad faith or of forging her own destiny. While one may read and sympathize with Nora's plight, perhaps a spectator might be inspired to improve his or her own stultifying circumstances. It might not mean in every case that he or she might leave a marriage, but it might bring the reader to scrutinize his or her own motives and responsibilities within the context of an intimate relationship.

A significant aspect of current philosophical discussions of personal autonomy, then, is Dworkin's notion of preference satisfaction. Most people genuinely desire good things, both for themselves and for those around them. Most people seek balance and meaning in their lives. Once again, we might think about Robert Conway in *Lost Horizons*, a man who had position, personal wealth, and future security. He had satisfying familial relationships and as well as a maximal range of political and social liberties. Nevertheless, Conway believed his life lacked meaning somehow, and was willing to sacrifice other life goods in order to achieve a kind of fulfilled and unified existence that we might associate with autonomous personhood. It is this ability to pursue their own desires within the limits of morality, under their own control, in harmony with their inner selves that best characterizes autonomous agents. As we have seen, this view might collide with some Freudian perceptions of the person as the unwitting product of his or her

unconscious forces that work jointly with social forces to influence personality formation. Under Freudian descriptions, autonomy is at best unfounded, and at worst, imaginary.

Autonomy requires at least an ability to know ourselves, to define ourselves, and to direct ourselves. Such self-knowledge and self-directedness amounts to more than the control one exerts over an intentional act, somewhat analogous to Dworkin's first-order desires. It amounts to having some sort of responsibility for our true selves.¹⁸² On Taylor's and a number of the other philosophers' views cited here, we are responsible for our characters and for the actions we generate. Taylor in particular argues that our freedom and responsibility as agents turn on our capacities to form and alter our true selves and our second-order desires by reflection, assessment, self-criticism, redefinition, and revision. In practical terms, what this means is that we are able to shed undesirable characteristics and behaviors and assimilate new ones in the light of a self-evaluation based on criteria involving some set of articulated and unarticulated principles or ideals we hold dear (or perhaps on the basis of nothing more than what is rational and reasonable).

An account of autonomy that appeals to this level of reflectiveness and self-definition is one that also takes on the characteristics of a skill. It may be a skill we are not explicitly taught, but is a kind of learning curve that reflects our ability to integrate our

¹⁸² Cf. Dworkin. Cf. also Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), 5-20. Cf. Gary Watson, "Free Agency," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975), 205-220. Cf. Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," in A.E. Rorty, ed., *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 281-199.

own experiences and principles with those of others, to develop resources to deal with our circumstances, to act on the basis of our own deliberations, to choose a life plan and the flexibility required to deploy it. We add to our conception of autonomy, as a state of one's character, the conception that it is also a kind of proficiency or achievement. As with any kind of proficiency, there are more familiar ways to engage autonomy and autonomous behaviors and other, novel ways to engage autonomy. Thus, when we define ourselves as autonomous beings, we may do so by behaving in accordance with established rules and practices, but we also have the option of reaching out to new practices and new ways of defining ourselves. However we picture autonomy, we never quite escape the Kantian view that the radical autonomy of rational agents confers a definition of human dignity and significance to that life which is self-chosen.

Behind all of this is Locke's Enlightenment ideal of disengaged and procedural reason. As we have seen, this ideal is not unique to Locke although he was the first philosopher to spell out the relation between the disengaged stance and rational control of self. Locke is one of the first philosophers who connects the notion of a rational, self-responsibility with an ideal of personal freedom or independence, a theme articulated by Kant as well. As Taylor notes, our inheritance of this modern ideal of disengaged reason also gives rise to a reflexive stance with respect to ourselves and our behaviors.¹⁸³ Disengaged reason requires us to turn our gaze inward and become aware of our own

¹⁸³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Chapter 9.

activity and the processes that constitute our characters. We are responsible for the processes that form and shape us, thus making it imperative that we critically examine our habits, our thoughts, our beliefs, and so on.

If we characterize expressions of autonomy in this way, it is clear that the creative imagination and the arts figure into novel expressions of autonomy. Sometimes given prescriptions for autonomous personhood fail to satisfy some set of individuals and they seek out other avenues for such achievement. To do so, to propel oneself in new directions requires an act of imagination, Danto's "as if". Imagination that allows us to envision some way of living our lives that is not given from immediate, personal experiences, that allows us to imagine certain goods and abilities in our lives that we then attempt to exemplify. Art is the vehicle of imagination, a medium by which we might entertain the merits of certain courses of action and states of being. The creative imagination through art enables us to bridge the gap between social and institutional expectations and one's personal ideals, desires, and life plans.

We find necessary interactions and reciprocities between community and the autonomous self. Not all of these interactions stifle autonomy, indeed, as we have seen many of them contribute to one's autonomy. But some do limit us. Genuine proficiency in autonomy makes it possible for individuals to legislate themselves, to control their life plans, to put themselves in charge of their destinies, all within the context of a social background. Autonomy empowers individual transfigurations when social and community

limitations impose unacceptable restraints on an individual's authenticity, transfigurations that may deviate from accepted social and community models of behavior.

There is a fit between reasonableness, individual control, innovation, and personal autonomy. We are free when we can remake the conditions of our own existence, when we can dominate the things that dominate us. We prize autonomy as a process that empowers us to integrate the many divergent and sometimes conflicting forces and values in our lives so that we may enrich our selves through self-definition, self-discovery, and self-legislation. There is a kind of synergism embedded in this description of autonomy, indicating that the procedural application simultaneously involves independence from and dependence upon community in such a way as to align ourselves with reality as fully constructed human beings.

Having said this, it should be clear how the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness fails to fit into a functional and instrumental picture of art. As we have seen, if we accept the idea that art has the power to influence us as well as our community, then we can not accept the Kantian notion of disinterestedness that defines beauty as a purely intrinsic value, an end in itself. We may sympathize with Kantian and neo-Kantian motives to purify art in order to establish its worth apart from and above the realm of instrumental value. This approach represented one attempt to protect art from ruthlessly dominant instrumental approaches, from a grossly debasing instrumental rationality, and to protect it from ordinariness, banality, and narrow problem-solving.

The contributions of philosophers such as Dewey and Danto and Wittgenstein, however, make it clear that for something to have human value, it must in some way serve the need of people and enhance their lives and development so they might cope with the world. Dewey specifically rejects the artificially imposed opposition between instrumental and intrinsic value. "...a philosophy of art is sterilized unless it makes us aware of the function of art in relation to other modes of experience."¹⁸⁴ He argues that the special function and value of art is not directed to specific ends, but serves a variety of ends. Charles Taylor's analysis in *Sources of the Self* similarly indicates that at least one function of art is to enhance our immediate experience, thus furthering other ends we may pursue.

Art, through the use of creative imagination, keeps us alive to the power to experience the ordinary world in its fulness. But, art does more than this as mentioned before. Self-discovery and self-realization, primary aspects of autonomy, involve creative imagination, just as creative imagination figures into the creation of art. Imagination also transfigures the real through the power of art to symbolize reality. Art exhibits dual functions as it reflects reality as well as reconfigures it. Just as autonomy involves originality, often scorning convention, tradition, and authority, so does the creation of art. As we have seen, we can construe both as a self-definition in dialogue.

¹⁸⁴ John Dewey, *Art As Experience*. (New York: Perigee Books, 1980) 12.

Another thread we have followed in these pages has been the relation between autonomy and an aesthetic of life. Personal autonomy amounts to something more than a radical individualism, a theme we find in Kant, Rousseau, and Taylor. On many accounts, autonomy is intimately bound with notions of self-realization. John Stuart Mill, for example, discusses freedom as a condition for self-realization:

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision.....It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm's way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being? It really is of importance, not only what men do, but also what manner of men they are that do it. Among the works of man which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance is surely man himself.¹⁸⁵

Autonomy as a kind of aesthetic of life requires a sense about one's life and one's life projects, which intersect the private and communal aspects of one's life. Its importance derives not only because it is a desired end in itself, but because in many ways, it is the ground of developed moral personhood, an argument Kant proposes. There is a kind of circularity to this autonomous self-realization that Joel Feinberg comments on:

¹⁸⁵ John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty*. Ed. David Spitz (New York: Norton, 1975) 56.

The highest good for man is neither enjoyment nor passive contentment but rather a dynamic process of growth and self-realization. Self-realization consists in the actualization of certain uniquely human potentialities, the bringing to full development of certain powers and abilities. This in turn requires constant practice in making difficult choices among alternative hypotheses, policies, and actions.¹⁸⁶

Autonomy further involves our ethics, our politics, and our art. The circularity consists in the notion that we must achieve some degree of autonomy in order to realize our selves, and that realization further contributes to autonomous development. As we have seen, this quest for autonomy is a private quest with public dimension. The expression of our private thoughts borrows from shared language, techniques, and mediums of the past to develop them, often in novel ways. Paul Gomberg makes the same point:

...there is something right about the idea that we should be self-governing in deciding what to believe. In those areas where I am competent, as competent as or more competent than others, I am autonomous to the extent that I investigate and discover information, to the extent that I have learned how to think on my own and apply that skill to extend my knowledge. To the extent that I rely on others, I am not individually autonomous. But most of our knowledge is social. Where groups carry out cooperative investigations, they may be collectively, not individually autonomous. The idea of being individually sovereign in deciding what to believe is unrealistic, except in narrow domains where one

¹⁸⁶ Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 21.

is especially competent or in contexts—if any exist—where we all are or should strive to be equally competent.¹⁸⁷

If we think of autonomy as a process (or a state) of self-legislation, any information that makes us more effective at the process also makes us more autonomous. Art figures into this enrichment of the self through linguistic, cognitive, psychological, social, and aesthetic changes that are mutually supportive if not outright collaborative as Charles Taylor argues. For Taylor, and Dewey as well, art is a vehicle for social, political, and ethical progress on both communal and individual levels. This is a reason that we are led to suspect aesthetic theories that institutionally compartmentalize high art. Such compartmentalization renders high art elitist and separate from the lives and experiences of ordinary people. To theoretically distance high art from ordinary human experience and human projects amounts to a form of socio-cultural oppression, a theory of art that is necessarily exclusionary and repressive.

There is little question that works of art have functioned historically as instruments of social criticism, transformation, and even protest. One has only to go to the corner bookstore to find novels, poems, and plays of incisive social satire. Nor must these works be radically political in order to persuade. One of the fascinating potentialities of art is its capacity to invite visions of other worlds and ways of life that can help us realize that our

¹⁸⁷ Paul Gornberg, "Autonomy and Free Expression." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 25, Issue 2, Fall, 1994. 97-104.

own social and cultural practices are neither necessary nor ideal. Such visions open the way for individual and social change.

Other critics charge that high art can not help but implicitly endorse or reinforce the *status quo*. At one time, it was a kind of aesthetic emancipation to theoretically free art from its traditional role of serving political, religious, and social institutions, it seems counter-intuitive to assert the radical autonomy of art from social and ethical practice. Although serving the *status quo* describes some art, historical as well as contemporary, especially art that is created under some sort of patronage, it fails to capture the larger picture of art's influence. A refutation of this charge requires little more than indicating that one of the benefits we derive from historical art turns on its ability to function conditionally, to show us both how things were and how things could be. We might take it to be one of the positive contributions of Marxist and feminist criticism that aesthetic and art theory are viewed as deeply political and moral, thus open to social and moral criticism. What might seem to be a social necessity or a function of human psychology or community, turns out to be contingent under the purview of artistic interpretation. Duchamp's, Warhol's, and Rauschenberg's often satiric conferrals of artistic status upon mass-produced functional objects like Brillo boxes, beds, and bottle racks are illustrative of a contemporary effort to consciously establish this interconnection between art and the lives of ordinary people.

Aesthetic gratification, self-discovery, self-enrichment, self-determination, not just in the practical experiments of living our lives, but often through a more cautious option of “trying on” new ways of being, or new vocabularies of self-reflection that enable us to take on virtual lives and experiences. Our efforts to define ourselves, to engage autonomous lives, while private, unshared, and unsuited to argument, are nevertheless influenced by social constructivism. And this constructivism has parallels with art. As Taylor says:

The notion that each one of us has an original way of being human entails that each of us has to discover what it is to be ourselves. But the discovery can't be made by consulting pre-existing models, by hypothesis. So it can be made only by articulating it afresh. We discover what we have in us to be by becoming that mode of life by giving expression in our speech and action to what is original in us.¹⁸⁸

Taylor sees a “close analogy, even a connection, between self-discovery and artistic creation....”¹⁸⁹ As a result of expressivist trends in contemporary art, that is, that art is no longer conceived as an imitation of reality, we have come to understand art in terms of a creation, and the artist as a creator. We have seen that Taylor thinks these ideas coalesce. As ordinary persons we define and formulate ourselves through expression and even more does the artist become a model of human experience venerated as an agent of original self-definition and the creator of cultural values. The artist discovers himself or herself through

¹⁸⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. 61.

¹⁸⁹ Taylor, 61.

the work created. In order to do so, the artist may invent a new artistic vocabulary of some sort (a new way of painting, melodic and tonal structures in music, new symbolism and style of literature, and so on) and make certain self-discoveries through the creation of the art. Along these lines, Taylor observes that self-discovery requires *poiesis*—making.¹⁹⁰

Each of us has our own way of expressing what it is to be human; we have our own “measure”. If I am fully autonomous, my humanity is not an imitation of anyone else’s. And because there is no pre-existent model for any one of us, we discover ourselves by articulating, by expressing what is original in us. The danger is that I might compromise my own inner nature and originality if I unreflectively submit to social pressure to conform. Acting out of my own autonomy means that I articulate, discover, and define myself according to my own originality. Yet, as we have seen, we define our identities against a given background of things that matter to us. These things, social influences and contexts, are given to us and order our lives in some significant way. They come from beyond us and somehow make it possible to develop autonomously. Says Taylor:

If to define myself is to bring what is as yet imperfectly determined to full definition, if the paradigm vehicle for doing this is artistic creation, then art can no longer be defined in traditional terms. The traditional understanding of art was as mimesis. Art imitates reality. This of course left a number of crucial questions open: in particular, the question of what kind and level of reality was to be imitated. Was it the empirical reality surrounding us? Or the higher

¹⁹⁰ Taylor, *Ethics*, 62.

reality of the Forms? And what was the relation between them? But on the new understanding, art is not imitation, but expression in the sense discussed here. It makes something manifest while at the same time realizing it, completing it.¹⁹¹

So it is that with art as a vehicle, we can articulate these possibilities, of wholeness, of autonomy, whether as creator or spectator. Art has the potential to raise our consciousness about ourselves as individuals and about our communities. It is supported by human relationships and contributes to our abilities to live our lives with a measure of dignity and autonomy, all of which require connection with other human beings. The great significance of art lies in its functional aspects: how it is appropriated and deployed, its dialogical capacities, and its potential for promoting progressive social and moral agendas. Art, itself, is a relation that connects us to other persons, thereby contributing to personal autonomy, and drawing us into that universal conversation that partially constitutes the human experience.

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¹⁹¹ Taylor, *Sources*, 376-377.

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