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Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered: Reflections on Art, Fundamentalism, and Democracy

Daniel R. DeNicola
Gettysburg College

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Abstract

This philosophical lecture explores the tension between art and morality, beginning with the opposing viewpoints—aestheticism and moralism—that one should trump the other. As exemplary case studies, several controversial art exhibits—works that fueled the culture wars of the 1980's are examined to identify the concerns of advocates and critics. This leads to deeper reflections on the artistic assumptions of religious fundamentalism, the role of art in a democracy, and the possibility that artistic exploration can be a form of moral action.

Keywords

Art and morality, Artistic freedom, Freedom of expression, Aestheticism, Aesthetics and ethics, Moralism, Culture wars, Censorship, Obscenity, Function of art, Philosophy of art, Democracy and art, Fundamentalism and art, Richard Mapplethorpe, John Dewey and art

Disciplines

Esthetics | Ethics and Political Philosophy | Philosophy

Comments

This lecture was delivered at Rollins College (Winter Park FL) on April 10, 1996. The event was sponsored by the Masters of Liberal Studies (MLS) Program at Rollins to honor Prof. DeNicola as a founder of that program, since he was about to move from Rollins to become Provost at Gettysburg College beginning June, 1996.

Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered:

Reflections on Art, Fundamentalism, and Democracy¹

Daniel R. DeNicola

I

"In the final analysis, there are only two basic attitudes, two points of view: the aesthetic and the moral." So wrote Thomas Mann.² Art and morality have an ancient quarrel, an ongoing tension that now and then erupts into open hostility.

The **moralistic position** is that moral reasons, commitments, and values are more basic, more commanding, and of more ultimate concern than any others. Whether anchored in religion or culture or reason or self, morality overrides aesthetics. When the cards of conflict are played, morality is to be trump. Restriction, censorship, or destruction of art works follow. Thus, Plato banishes the poets from his ideal *polis*; Yahweh commands that "thou shalt not make any graven image"; the early Confucian decries "new music" in which "people bend their bodies while they move back and forth, and there is a deluge of immoral sounds"; St. Augustine argues for severely restricting music in church; the United States government bans James Joyce's *Ulysses*; the state of Israel bans the playing of the music of Richard Wagner; the State of Florida leads the nation in attempts to remove books and films from library shelves on moral grounds.³

Aestheticism, on the other hand, holds that aesthetic experience is the greatest (or among the greatest) goods available to human beings. The creation of art is a fierce and consuming activity, and those who appreciate the resulting artistic merit have a small share in the glory. Whether divinely inspired or flushed with self-expression, art has its own integrity. And artistic creativity requires freedom from prior restraint. Thus Oscar Wilde wrote that "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well or badly written. That is all." And the MGM lion is wreathed by the motto, *Ars gratia artis* ("Art for art's sake").⁴

The moralist is outraged that the aesthete ignores matters of supreme importance—or worse, trivializes or mocks them. Lacking the guidance of moral

values, the aesthete cannot be trusted and may turn to obscenity or cruelty or blasphemy. The aesthete, however, fears the numbing *anaesthetic* of moralism, and frets that the vitality of art will be smothered by the life-denying impulse to censor and control, which teaches us to mistrust or restrain our expressive natures.

Both are in agreement on one point: *the arts are powerful*. Through a combination of craft and vision, the artist produces something that can mesmerize a viewer, transport a listener or a reader, or leave an audience spellbound. From paint on canvas, molded clay, words read or sung, are generated measurable physiological changes, welling emotions or alterations in mood, intense concentration, piercing insight, and treasured memories. The potent magic of art can bewitch, bother, and bewilder. But, for the moralist, that is precisely the danger. Without fidelity to truth and moral goodness, the "magic" of the artist is a sham. The power of the arts then flows not from divine inspiration or profound truth, but from the frailty, the gullibility of the human soul and the cleverness of the artist in manipulating illusions to suggest reality. In the end, the art object is artificial, not the real thing. Seduced by the beauty or vividness or drama, the audience is "played upon" and affected by nothing more than someone's fantasy—greasepaint and lighting, costume and makeup, horsetail on catgut. Beguiled again, the audience finds no epiphany, only dupery.

Despite this mistrust, there has long been hope of reconciliation between art and morality. One possible path is to recognize the arts as a useful or even necessary component in moral education. Plato, after all, claimed that the love of beauty can lead us to the good, and he required all citizens of his normative republic to spend the early years of their education learning *musike* (a combination of arts and humanities). Early Confucians believed that "the superior man...tries to promote music as a means to the perfection of human culture." The Christian church acknowledged the importance of the arts in creating the proper atmosphere for worship, in portraying God's beauty and power, and in teaching religious doctrine. Unfortunately, this path is very slippery. Make the connection between artistic experience and moral ends too loose and the moralist may not get the desired results (who knows what will be the effects of exposure to poetry or painting?). Make the connection too tight and the aesthete will protest (art will degenerate, becoming vapidly sentimental, or homogenized and propagandistic). Another path to reconciliation is to claim that by rejecting "narrow moral concerns," art (at least, great art) can lead us to "a higher morality." This approach is favored by such aesthetes as Friedrich Nietzsche, Percy Shelly, and Oscar Wilde. Shelly, for example, writes in his Preface to the tragedy, *The Cenci*:

There must be nothing attempted to make the exhibition subservient to what is vulgarly termed a moral purpose. The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching of the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself; in proportion to the possession of which knowledge, every human being is

*wise, just, sincere, tolerant and kind.*⁵

The peril here is that the "higher morality" at the summit may look nothing like what the poor moralist began with below; going "beyond good and evil" is an excellent adventure, but one likely to produce delusions or the outright loss of what the moralist holds dear. Both approaches seem to be subtle attempts by one side to co-opt and tame the other.

II

In 1989, the tension between art and morality exploded into a *kulturkampf*. Here are some vignettes from the culture wars:

1. On May 18, 1989, Senator Alphonse D'Amato (R-NY), in high dudgeon on the Senate floor, tore into pieces a reproduction of a photograph by artist Andres Serrano. He fumed that "[T]his so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity." He wondered aloud if "this is what contemporary art has sunk to...this outrage, this indignity," and condemned it as "filth" and "garbage." He was quickly supported by the intrepid Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who said, "If we have sunk so low in this country as to tolerate and condone this sort of thing, then we become part of it. This speech launched the battle over government support for the arts. The good senators had been made aware of the offending photograph by a letter (April 5, 1989) from the Reverend Donald Wildmon, the executive director of the American Family Association; Mr. Wildmon is the religious activist who led a national boycott of the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.⁶

The now-famous incendiary photograph was described by the *New York Times* as follows:

*[A photograph measuring] 60 inches by 40 inches and show[ing] Jesus on the cross in a golden haze through a smattering of minute bubbles against a dark, blood-colored background. By slight twisting and considerable enlargement, the image takes on a monumental appearance and the viewer would never guess that a small plastic crucifix was used. The work appears reverential, and it is only after reading the provocative and explicit label that one realizes the object has been immersed in urine.*⁷

The "provocative" title of the photograph was *Piss Christ*.

The vociferous battle launched by Serrano's work brought cries of "freedom of speech," "artistic merit," "censorship," and also "religious bigotry," and "sponsorship of moral depravity"; the result was a public law that is a, shall I say, "watered down" version of Helms's first proposal (PL 101-102), a

"hunkering down" by artists and government-sponsoring agencies, and, oh yes, increased fame for Andres Serrano.

2. In June the controversy spilled over when the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., cancelled its scheduled exhibit, *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*. *The Washington Post* claimed that the Corcoran did not wish to become embroiled in the political controversy over art, and—given the sexual content of some of Mapplethorpe's photographs—did not want to provide an exhibit which would galvanize the Congressional move to reduce funding for the NEA. (The Corcoran came to pay dearly for this decision with the resignation of its chief curator and several trustees, later the resignation of its director, the loss of ten percent of its membership, the withdrawal of numerous artists from scheduled exhibitions, the altered wills of significant donors, and the condemnation of various groups in the arts.) Less than a year later, the Mapplethorpe retrospective was booked for the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. With a long history of movie and theater closings and anti-pornography ordinances, Cincinnati police decided to shut down the exhibit. A grand jury indicted the Center and its director, Dennis Barrie, for "pandering obscenity" and child pornography. Apparently, this is the first time in U.S. history that a museum and its director have been so charged. Both were eventually acquitted.

The exhibition contained 175 photographs, including three special portfolios (named X, Y, and Z) of 13 photographs each. Portfolio Y contained images of flowers. The "obscenity" came from Portfolio X, which contained homoerotic and sadomasochistic images (which the *New York Times* characterized as "anal and penile penetration with unusual objects"), and Portfolio Z, which contained figure studies, including some of children. Mapplethorpe had required these portfolios to be exhibited in three juxtaposed rows, perhaps inviting comparisons of sensuality or composition. Adding to the intensity and pathos of this retrospective was the fact that the photographer had died of AIDS in March of 1989.⁸

3. In September of 1988, Salman Rushdie had published *The Satanic Verses*. India banned the book as blasphemous in October and was soon followed by at least eleven other nations. In 1989, it was burned by Muslims in England. In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a *fatwa* calling for the death of the author and his publishers, and assuring those who carried out the act of martyrdom. Several large bookstore chains withdrew the books—mostly out of justified fear for the safety of employees and patrons. Since then, Rushdie has lived in hiding, his marriage has dissolved, his Italian and Japanese translators and his Norwegian publisher have been critically wounded or killed, and several moderate Muslim leaders have been assassinated for decrying censorship of the book.

The style of the novel itself is one which makes distinguishing the real from the imaginary all but impossible—magical realism. Ironically, Rushdie claims that the novel

itself speaks to the controversy it generated: "At the beginning of Islam, you have a conflict between the sacred text and the profane text, between revealed literature and imagined literature." The *fatwa* was reaffirmed after the death of Khomeini despite apologies by Rushdie; it remains in effect today⁹.

4. This past year, the Phoenix Art Museum mounted an exhibit called "Old Glory: The American Flag in Contemporary Art." One piece titled *What is the Proper Way to Display the American Flag?* requires viewers who sign a guestbook to step on the flag; another piece, by Kate Millett, displays an American flag streaming from a toilet. Veterans have been outraged and picketed the exhibit. There have been shoving matches and threats of violence.¹⁰

* * *

One of the distressing aspects of these controversies is the way in which positions have become rigid and more extreme. What I earlier called the moralistic viewpoint is now represented by **fundamentalism**, the Religious Right. What I mean by a *fundamentalist* is *someone who believes (1) that morality is a matter of following God's commands; (2) that a specific sacred text is the revealed will of God to the believer, who should therefore grant it absolute inerrancy and a literal interpretation; and (3) that this moral viewpoint is the only valid one.* (Many fundamentalists also believe that the political order in which they find themselves should rest on these principles; they frequently base their reformist goal on a claim of history. I shall not include that claim in my definition here.)

The response of fundamentalists in cases like those cited above is first, of course, outrage and disgust: is nothing sacred? There is confidence that a confrontation with the artworks themselves (or sometimes with a mere verbal account of them) will be sufficient to provoke similar responses in others. Thus the prosecutor in the Cincinnati case, Frank Prouty, simply summoned the police to court, played the videotape of the Mapplethorpe exhibit, and said, "The pictures are the state's case."¹¹ That was all, and he rested the case for the people. Similarly, Senators D'Amato and Helms and the Ayatollah Khomeini had no doubts that Serrano's *Piss Christ* and Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* were religious slurs, respectively, of course. This reaction is often followed by the suspicion that there is a conspiracy of artists and academics who are seeking to undermine all that is moral and noble. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich hastily reacted to the Arizona flag exhibit, calling it "a prime example of the 'elite' values that Republicans hope to defeat in this year's election."¹² These fundamentalist moralists share several tendencies: they focus, of course, on the apparent content of the works; they assume that content straightforwardly displays the artist's values; they reject as irrelevant or untrustworthy any statement of the artist's intent.

How does the Cultural Left respond to the Religious Right? Consider the 1992 case in which feminist law professor Catharine MacKinnon and her students forced the University of Michigan to cancel an exhibition called *Porn' im'age'ry: Picturing Prostitutes*. This collection, primarily of photographs, was prepared by women—two of whom had been prostitutes. MacKinnon called the exhibit dangerous to women. She had not actually seen the exhibit, but a description of the contents was sufficient; she already had the conviction that pornographic images were harmful to women. In this and so many other recent examples, the Cultural Left is judging art by its political correctness.¹³

The fundamentalists and the Cultural Left are in agreement in the view that all art is ideological, that a work of art conveys a set of values. Both sides adopt a moralistic position, that is, both ascribe to the belief that art should be judged first by moral standards (though of course they differ sharply on the matter of what standards are valid). And both are willing to censor based on their standards. Interestingly, both also focus on content as the vehicle for the presentation of values. As a result, both Right and Left assume that representation is *de facto* advocacy, and they dismiss claims to the contrary, claims of interpretation or artist's intent, as irrelevant or disingenuous.

What has happened to aestheticism? It is still dominant in the artworld in a variety known as **formalism**, and it stands in opposition to the moralistic position at either end of the political spectrum. Clive Bell, the influential Bloomsbury group critic, proclaimed that aesthetic emotion is evoked in the observer by the **significant form** of the work; these objects achieve a timelessness and belong to "a kingdom not of this world."¹⁴ Aesthetic meaning and value inhere in the work itself—the artist's biography or intent, the social or historical context, the audience are separable and superfluous.¹⁵

The contrast between contemporary moralism and contemporary aestheticism is epitomized in an episode from the Cincinnati Arts Center trial. The first witness called by the defense was Janet Kardon, an expert in contemporary art and the organizer of the Mapplethorpe retrospective. Kardon, described in print as "an older, respectable woman" begins by explaining what a museum is, what a director's job is, and what a retrospective show is. She asserts that Robert Mapplethorpe is "one of the most important photographers working in the 80's in a formalist mode." She explains formalism. When prosecutor Prouty takes over, he asks her to give the court a "formalist analysis" of each of the allegedly obscene photographs. Prouty referred to the "self-portrait of Mapplethorpe with the handle of a whip inserted in his anus"; Kardon called it "almost classical in its composition." She delighted in the strong opposing diagonals in a piece involving urination. She spoke of the photographer's preference for "an extremely central image" in one of the pictures. Prouty asked, "That's the one where the forearm of one individual is inserted into the anus of another individual?" "Yes," she answered and proceeded to show similar composition in his flower pictures. Referring to the image of a man with his finger inserted into his penis,

she says, "Oh yes, Robert thought the hand gestures in this one were particularly beautiful." Prouty asks, "Did you ever consider whether homosexual values were appropriate for the community?" "We never discussed that," Kardon testifies.¹⁶

Was there ever a clearer confrontation in the culture wars? The moralist, fixed on representational content; the aesthete, entranced with form and lighting and texture. The aesthete regards the moralist's approach as unsophisticated; the moralist finds the aesthete oblivious to the obvious or perhaps infected by artspeak and a vacuous connoisseurship. The moralist is judging by cherished moral values; the aesthete keeps the concept of artistic merit hermetically sealed from direct moral judgments.

Are not both sides missing something about the nature of art?

III

Paintings and sculptures, poems and plays, have a peculiar ontological status. If they are representational, they depict something. What is depicted is not real, yet it is not unrelated to reality. (Mimetic theorists like Plato are likely to give works of art a lower ontological status than the physical reality they imitate, but perhaps it makes as much sense to think of art as surreal, as "reality plus.") Like Ovid's Pygmalion, who falls in love with the statue he sculpts, the artist and the viewer may be "taken in." Lucien Freud, the English painter has written:

*A moment of complete happiness never occurs in the creation of a work of art. The promise of it is felt in the act of creation, but disappears toward the completion of the work. For it is then that the painter realises that it is only a picture he is painting. Until then he had almost dared to hope that the picture might spring to life.*¹⁷

It is this paradoxical nature of art that produces its "magic," its power to bewitch, bother, and bewilder us. It is akin to metaphor and dream. Art is *virtual* reality.

The problem with the moralism of fundamentalists and the aestheticism of formalists is that neither can accept the artistic paradox and both force a resolution. Formalists unhinge art from reality altogether, discarding its image-content and its sources of inspiration, and leaving the experts sounding foolish and baffled about what art is and what makes some of it very good. Art is terribly important, it seems, yet unrelated to human experience. Fundamentalists (along with the moralists of the Cultural Left) equate art with reality—thus portrayal is advocacy, the word is the deed, and the fantasy is the fact. A fundamentalist believes, remember, that the sacred text must be read literally. This literalism is carried over to other texts, other aesthetic

experiences as well. So is the notion that the purpose of the words or pictures or sound is to convey a message, to impart a moral, to advocate. Art is moral.

The Cultural Left thinks art is political. It contains postmodernist voices which assert that all artworks are ideological (an observation which plays into the hands of the fundamentalists). Yet it is not that works of art are "real" in a traditional sense. First of all, for the postmodernist, the idea of reality has to be discarded. No, it's not simply a matter of the blind men and the elephant, where each observer has a different, personal, and equally valid interpretation of the beast's reality. Well, it is a bit like that—there are diverse interpretations—it's just that *there never was an elephant*. And the reason we thought there was probably has something to do with the fact that the observers were all men. For the Postmodernist, then, reality is but a pastiche of interpretations. This, in its way, also collapses the distinction between the artworld and "real life," between image and reality, between performer and audience. Avant garde theater, photography, and performance art are media which exploit this ambiguity. (The fact that Mapplethorpe's depictions were photographs rather than paintings or narratives contributed to the intensity of the response—after all, those were pictures of real people who actually did those things...and in front of a man with a camera!)

When the peculiarly paradoxical status of art works is collapsed in either direction, something important is lost. Art is reduced to only two options: either (1) it advocates something, has a moral, carries an ideological message—in which case, we must be attentive that it promotes our own ideology (however arbitrary that may be); or (2) it amuses, it entertains and gives pleasure and diversion—which may be either construed as harmless but trivial, or (more puritanically) a dreadful waste of time. Serious art, art which is not directed to either advocacy or amusement, cannot be accounted for and is therefore denied existence. Where is the liberal theory of art, a theory that would respect the ontological incongruity and ground the seriousness of art in its very virtuality?

IV

When liberals have responded to the public flaps over offending art, they have turned quickly to the principle of freedom of expression and use the First Amendment like a mantra. Paintings and novels are, like speech, a form of expression that is (or should) be guaranteed basic legal protection. While artists (even formalists) might prefer that the defense was based on aesthetic considerations, they are usually willing to take refuge in this line of argument and are grateful for the shield that protects creative freedom seen as so necessary to their work. Although this approach make the issue turn on such morally-grounded notions as "liberty" and "rights," the fundamentalist is appalled that the issue of the morality of the content of the work (and its possible effects on the audience) is set aside, as beyond the reach of public concern and

certainly of public control.

At least the principle of freedom of expression does recognize the difference between word and deed, between fantasy and fact. In the United States, of course, there are important areas in which the distinction is collapsible—the "clear and present danger" doctrine, and obscenity laws where "redeeming social value or artistic merit" is the positive test, and, recently, laws against hate speech. Convinced of the power of art to change those who look and listen; sure of antisocial and immoral consequences from offensive art (both individual works and the cumulative effect of many such works); and linking the current fraying of the social fabric, rise in violence, and loss of civility causally to the presence of offensive art, moralists of many ethical persuasions, even liberals, are tempted to join the fundamentalists in resolving the ontological paradox, collapsing the distinction between art and the real world. The word *is* the deed, the picture *is* the act—the lyrics of "Gangsta Rap" *are* acts against police, women, and Whites; Mapplethorpe's photographs *are* seductions into homosexual and sadomasochistic episodes. While one might wonder whether art is that powerful, whether exposure to art really is that capable of modifying behavior (and indeed the empirical evidence for such a connection could not be found by two national commissions on pornography), humanists are haunted by the infamous episode of Goethe's publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a romantic tale of a young man's suicide, which launched a wave of suicides across Europe.

But *is* the best defense simply to resort to personal freedom and perhaps our right to private (aesthetic) amusement? Is there no more robust theory that can defend art on its merits? What is the purpose of art in a democracy? What have democratic theorists had to say about the purposes of art? It is surprising—shocking, really—that there is so little discussion of the arts in the history of democratic theory. After all, the Age of Pericles, the dawning of democracy, was marked by a florescence of public art. (Totalitarians, incidentally, discerning a way to combine art's power with their moral and political aims, have certainly found easily adaptable aesthetic theories penned by the likes of Plato, Marx, and Hegel.) But John Locke is virtually silent on the issue. And Rousseau is, as usual, surprising: the author of the *Social Contract* turns out to be a severe moralist and censor. He wrote a long public letter, the *Letter to d'Alembert*, in which he broke with the Encyclopaedists and argued that his home city of Geneva should not have a civic theater. His reasoning is complex, but he concluded that the craft of acting, the lifestyle of actors, the content of plays, the effects of the audience—all are corrupting of important moral values. However, he starts from the premise that the theater is a form of amusement.¹⁸ John Stuart Mill discusses the issue rarely, usually obliquely and in terms of liberty. (Even his essay on Coleridge is a discussion of epistemology and not aesthetics directly.)¹⁹ Immanuel Kant (who asserts that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good") offers a conception of aesthetic experience and judgment that links our transcendental nature with our sensory experience, but there is no discussion of social purposes.²⁰ Two interesting and perhaps relevant ideas

may be found: Friedrich Schiller, though Kantian in outlook, does add the important claim that moral education requires an experience of beauty.²¹ Alexander Baumgarten, the first to use the term "aesthetics" philosophically, describes the sensory world as "confusion's field" (*campus confusionis*), but by ingenious wordplay he means to imply not the logical confusion and irrationality that rationalists imply to it, but the unifying (con-fusion) of diverse particulars in the act of perception.²²

We might note that there are two separable models of democracy, both sharing the foundational idea that citizens should determine public policy for themselves, and that citizens are equal in casting one vote. The first and older notion (modeled perhaps on the Greek *φράτρα*, a clan, club, or brotherhood) conceives democracy as an equality among similars; the unity of citizenship is achieved by ignoring or excluding difference. The second and more recent notion is that democracy is a moral climate in which everyone's experience is valid and useful in the communal construction of knowledge and the good; here diversity is prized and unity is achieved through the cooperative application of this experience to social improvement. Tradition is valued not as an unassailable source of truth, but as the legacy of human experience.

Though fundamentalism is often attracted to totalitarianism, it may have no difficulty accepting the older view of democracy. Both share a commitment to a fixed moral order. All important moral issues have been settled—except for insuring that existing citizens comply and that the revered truths are passed on to a new generation. Of course, fundamentalism has profound opposition to the newer conception. The idea that the moral order is constructed, that morality is open-ended and that our moral sensitivities and understanding can change and grow; that the very diversity of moral viewpoints can be valuable rather than dangerous—all of these are anathema to the fundamentalist.

Let's call the older conception of democracy the *Periclean* and the newer one the *Deweyan*, for John Dewey, who advanced it in many works over a long life. Dewey is one philosopher of liberal democracy who **does** have a complex and rich theory of aesthetics. He asserts, in *Art as Experience*, that "art is more moral than moralities."²³

This is an interesting claim; it is not simply, as Dewey develops it, another version of the "art responds to a higher morality" claim of some aesthetes. First, note the plural: "moralities." Dewey is referring to moral codes, fixed interpretations of moral values, what he calls "consecrations of the status quo." Art, by its very virtuality, its paradoxical nature, is both real and not real; it extends and transcends our experience, and yet, in the end, provides observers with a new, aesthetic experience. Dewey claims that art "has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit." Our first intimations of a redirection of desires and values requires imagination. Paradoxically, it is the indifference to conventional praise and blame that gives art its moral potency. Art insinuates possibilities of human relations not necessarily sanctioned by moral rules and precepts

and literal readings of existing texts, and thereby becomes a well-spring of values. As Salmon Rushdie says, art brings newness into the world.²⁴ It is a mistake, Dewey cautions, to expect this of each art work, taken one by one. It is rather the cumulative effect of the arts of an era. Nor can we expect to judge the actual contribution of any given work in a short span of time. That's why freedom is valued—not only to permit a playful and unfettered imagination, but also to prevent a premature judgment based on any fixed and final sense of the moral.

Does this liberal interpretation of aesthetic experience require that we abandon our moral values? No, not at all. We are left in the ironic posture of having and acting upon defensible moral commitments, yet simultaneously knowing that other, quite different commitments may be found defensible as well.²⁵ As Wendy Steiner has written, we should expect "a situation in which art and the life of the mind can be enjoyed with a knowing pleasure, one that thrills to every richness art can offer, yet does not shrink from the issues that art can raise...aware at the same time that it is still art and not something else."²⁶

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NOTES

Special Note: Daniel R. DeNicola has been Provost and Professor of Philosophy at Gettysburg College since 1996. He may be reached at ddenicol@gettysburg.edu. When this lecture was delivered in the spring of 1996, he was Professor of Philosophy at Rollins College. The paper's references are contemporary to that date.

1. This paper was delivered as the Master of Liberal Studies Program (MLS) Lecture at Rollins College (Winter Park FL) on April 10, 1996. I am grateful to Professor Edward H. Cohen, Kenan Professor of English and Director of the MLS Program, for the invitation to deliver the lecture on that occasion. I briefly discussed some of these issues as the chair of a panel sponsored by the Atlantic Center for the Arts in February 1990; an edited transcript of that forum was published by the Center under the title *Limits on Artistic Freedom*. In 1992, I had more extensive discussions of the ideas in this paper with MLS students in my course called *Art and Morality*. I owe them my thanks for another wonderful teaching experience; their dialogue was stimulating and helpful in clarifying my own thinking. Similarly, undergraduate students in the courses titled *Philosophy of Music* and *Philosophy of the Arts* at Rollins College have heard discussions of these topics and have often raised perceptive and beneficial questions.

Recent works which develop parallel lines of argument are: Robert Hughes, *The Culture of*

Complaint: The Fraying of America (Oxford, 1993); Frederick Turner, *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit*, (New York, 1995); and Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago, 1995).

2. "The Politics of Aestheticism" in Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, translated by Walter D. Morris (New York, 1983). Quoted by Wayne C. Booth in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, p.382 (Berkeley, 1988).

3. See, respectively: Plato's *Republic*, Bks. III and X, and *Laws*, Bks. II, VII, and XI; The Book of *Exodus*, 20:4; *Yochi, Liki*, XIX; St. Augustine's *De Musica*, esp. Bk. VI; *United States of America v. One Book Called "Ulysses," Random House, Inc.*, 1933; *New York Times*, July 18, 1991; *The Orlando Sentinel*, reports during each of the past five years.

4. The phrase *l'art pour l'art* became popular in France in the first half of the 19th century, with the support of Gautier, Baudelaire, and later Flaubert. In the later 1800's, Pater, Wilde, and Beardsley adopted the idea, which became current in England. It is related to the New Criticism as promulgated by Ransom, Tate, and Brooks in the 20th century. For the Oscar Wilde remark, see the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

5. Quoted by James L. Jarrett in *The Quest for Beauty*, pp. 235,236 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.,1957). Nietzsche's ideas related to this position may be found in *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Gay Science*.

6. The best source concerning the first two of the controversies outlined in this section is *Culture Wars: Documents From the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, edited by Richard Bolton (New York, 1992). Mr. Wildmon's letter and the speeches of Sens. D'Amato and Helms, from which the quotations were taken, are reprinted therein (pp. 27-29). These cases also receive extension in the Atlantic Center for the Arts forum, *Limits to Artistic Freedom*, cited earlier.

7. William H. Honan, "Artist Who Outraged Congress Lives Amid Christian Symbols," *New York Times*, August 16, 1989. Quoted by Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, p. 11 (Chicago, 1995). Steiner includes an extensive interpretive discussion of the first three controversies I have cited here.

8. Bolton, *op. cit.*, includes many documents relevant to the Mapplethorpe controversy; Steiner, *op. cit.*, devotes a chapter to this case. Both works include reprints of relevant photographs from the exhibit.

9. The most complete sources for this case to date are Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, *The Rushdie File* (Syracuse, 1990), and Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair* (Birch Lane, 1990). Steiner, *op. cit.*, includes an excellent chapter on this case in the context of the issues discussed

here. The Rushdie quotation is from a 1989 interview reprinted in *The Rushdie File*, p. 23., and also quoted by Steiner.

10. *The Orlando Sentinel*, April 2, 1996.

11. This quotation and an account of the trial may be found in a *Village Voice* article by Elizabeth Hess, "Art on Trial: Cincinnati's Dangerous Theater of the Ridiculous" (October 23, 1990), reprinted in Bolton, *op. cit.*

12. *Orlando Sentinel*, *loc. cit.*

13. Wendy Steiner, *op. cit.*, reviews this case in a similar spirit.

14. Clive Bell, *Art* (London, 1914).

15. This viewpoint is held also by the New Critics of the 1930's to 1950's—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks.

16. This episode is quoted in the Hess article reprinted in Bolton, *op. cit.*

17. Lucien Freud, "Thoughts on Painting," in *Encounter* (1954); quoted in E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, (Princeton, 1960) p. 94.

18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theater*, translated by Allan Bloom (Ithaca, 1960).

19. *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, edited by J. M. Robson (Toronto, 1963-91).

20. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by J. H. Bernard (New York, 1951) and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, translated by John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, 1960).

21. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford, 1967).

22. Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poena pertinentibus*

(Halle, 1734), translated in *Reflections on Poetry*, by K. Aschenbrenner and W. Holther (Berkeley, 1974).

23. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), especially Chapter XIV, from which the quotations in this paragraph are drawn.

24. Paraphrased from Rushdie's comments in "In Good Faith," *Independent on Sunday*, (February 4, 1990, p. 4), and quoted in Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

25. Richard Rorty extends this concept of irony in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989).

26. *Op. cit.*, p. 211. Steiner and I share key points: the view of art as ontologically paradoxical; the identification of literalism as a contributing problem with fundamentalism of any stripe; the call for a liberal aesthetic. There are also significant differences: she does not focus on the confrontation I've described in Section I; she extends her vastly more replete argument into other important areas; she does not offer a clear definition of "fundamentalism"; she does not mention John Dewey or his aesthetics as a promising response.