



MORALITY, SOCIETY, AND THE LOVE OF ART

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The principal focus of the essay is the idea of artistic value, understood as the value of a work of art as the work of art it is, and the essay explores the connections, if any, between artistic value and a variety of other values (social, moral, educational, and character-building) in human life. I start with a series of observations about social values and then turn to moral values. Beginning from Goethe's claim that 'music cannot affect morality, nor can the other arts, and it would be wrong to expect them to do so', I proceed from music through the other arts; I distinguish different conceptions of morality; I highlight what I call a work of art's positive moral value (its power for moral improvement); and I distinguish three kinds of moral improvement, one taking pride of place. My conclusion is that the positive moral value of works of art has been greatly overrated. I then return to the social values of art, looking at the situation from a very different point of view and reaching new conclusions, some of them positive. I end by explaining why my observations and arguments about the positive moral value of a work of art in no way diminishes the importance of art in human life, the true end of art having an importance in human life not guaranteed by morality.

I

It is possible to imagine a human world without art, even a world as scientifically and technologically advanced as our own.¹ However, if art is understood in a wide sense, this claim might well be denied. For a generous understanding of art will include, in the first place, artefacts – pots, trays, pieces of furniture, rugs, clothes, for example – the appearance of which is not fully determined by the nature of the material of which they are formed and by their suitability to perform their intended function but possess in addition aspects the maker has imposed on them to yield a greater perceptual appeal or emotional satisfaction than otherwise they would have had. And it will include, secondly, the telling of stories in which the sounds and rhythms of the language are intended to capture the listeners' attention, encourage the imagination, and impress the contents of the story on the memory. But if art embraces as much as this, then art, in some form or forms, has existed, perhaps only in a primitive or rudimentary way, perhaps only in various enhancements of everyday life (as with bodily adornments), and perhaps only in the service of a more important aspect of the culture (as handmaidens to religion, in religious ceremonies, for example), in every society, culture, or civilization of which we have record. However, this does not

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¹ By 'a human world' I mean a world occupied by creatures with similar physical, perceptual, intellectual, and emotional capacities to those of human beings.



imply that an artless world is unimaginable: there is no contradiction in the conception of a world occupied by human-like beings, some or many of whom have enough time free from obtaining the necessities of life to engage in other activities, but who do not construct works of art.

What would such a world be like? It would not necessarily be one in which the only things people do, in their free time, is participate in one or another form of sport, or play cards, bet on horse races, go fishing, swim, sunbathe, reminisce, go hang-gliding, throw snowballs, play draughts, hunt foxes, climb mountains, ski, fly kites, read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or engage in any other kind of activity that does not essentially involve aesthetic sensitivity. For it would not necessarily be a world in which people lack any aesthetic sense: they might have an aesthetic sensitivity, but one that is focused entirely on the natural world. So it would not have to be a world in which nobody likes to listen to birdsong for its own sake, preferring one bird's song to another, in which nobody likes looking at flowers, preferring the shape and colours of one flower to those of another, in which nobody delights in the appearance of a spectacular rainbow, with not just a primary and secondary but also a supernumerary bow. Nor would it rule out people choosing one colour rather than another for the ceiling or walls of their house, nor cutting flowers and placing them in a vase on a table (without attempting to arrange them in an aesthetically attractive manner). And there could well be pictures drawn or painted in a non-art world – both of actual and non-actual things – as long as their sole aim were non-aesthetic.

But such a world – an artless world in which people are endowed with and exercise aesthetic sensitivity – is immensely unlikely. For it is almost inevitable that the existence of aesthetic sensitivity will in time, unconstrained by tyranny of one sort or another, lead to the production of works of art. Why is this? The reason is obvious: if people delight in looking at trees, flowers, clouds, and falcons in flight, or in listening to the song of a nightingale, it is only too probable, given a certain amount of free time, given that their lives are not fully occupied just with keeping alive, that their preferences, so far exercised on things that no one has made, will encourage the construction of artefacts that increase the opportunity for aesthetic delight and perhaps exceed the delight provided by unmade things. At the simplest level, rather than just placing flowers in a vase anyhow, people are likely to want to arrange the flowers in a manner that pleases more than the random distribution, and this arrangement is, if not already there, on the way to the construction of a work of art (as in the art of Ikebana). Or rather than just listening pleasurably to birdsong, people are likely to find ways, with or without the use of an instrument, of making series of sounds that imitate birdsong, which would in time lead to deviating in pleasurable ways from what

they have heard, thus creating the art of music. Or they might delight in producing rhythmic sounds, rhythms that encourage corresponding bodily movements, thus issuing in the dance. Naturally some people, much more than others, will be interested in, and successful at, creating these artefacts, their success being reflected in the admiration of others for their products; and so, given the opportunity, they will become artists, devoting themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, to the creation of such works. And the existence of aesthetic sensitivity, through encouraging such performances as the telling of tales and the engagement in rhythmic bodily movements, accompanied or not by music, to assume forms that capture the attention of an audience and elicit admiration for the manner in which they are performed, will create such artistic roles as those of actor, dancer, director. So, for an advanced artless human world to exist, its inhabitants, if free to create objects of aesthetic appreciation, would need to lack aesthetic sensitivity.² And a lack of aesthetic sensitivity would, as such, have both benefits and losses: for example, nothing would be perceived as ugly or aesthetically repellent, but nothing would be perceived as beautiful or aesthetically attractive.

But now, although it certainly appears to be logically possible that intelligent beings with perceptual and intellectual capacities similar to those of human beings might lack aesthetic sensitivity, nature might well be such that this possibility is ruled out: it might well not be naturally possible. For human-like creatures would, it seems, have to evolve by natural selection, and this process, whatever particular form it might take on other planets, appears to underlie, and lead eventually to, the development of aesthetic sensitivity, and so literature, dance, music, and the visual arts.³ In which case art of some kind or another will be present in any human world that has developed sufficiently to endow humans with time to exercise their aesthetic sensitivities in active, rather than passive, ways.

II

If an activity has an aim, then instances of the activity, evaluated as such, are evaluated against the aim. Accordingly, an individual instance possesses value as an instance of that activity to the degree that it achieves the aim, and a performer of the activity is a good performer of the activity insofar as she has the capacity

² It would, however, be wrong to think that the creation of works of art merely adds to the number of objects available for aesthetic appreciation. For works of art, unlike objects that are not products of human creation, display qualities that accrue to them only because they are works of art. See Kendall L. Walton, 'Style and the Products and Processes of Art', in *Marvelous Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222–23.

³ See especially Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to perform the activity well, that is, produce valuable instances of it. It follows that if the aim of the activity is to create an artefact of a particular kind, and such an artefact can be a better or a worse instance of that kind, and the aim is to produce a good instance – perhaps to produce as good an instance as one can (within limits of time, effort, and so on) – then a good performer of the activity is one who has the capacity to produce good artefacts of the kind in question. Let's call the value associated with the activity – the value as defined by the aim of the activity – the activity's specific value. About any activity's specific value a question, or set of questions, about the value of its specific value is always possible. The specific value that is my concern is artistic value, the value of art as art, or the value of a work of art as the work of art it is, and the general question I want to address – a question often crudely expressed as 'What is the value of art?'⁴ – is the value of artistic value to or in human life.⁵ This general question covers a number of different kinds of value – the moral, educational, social, therapeutic, cognitive, character-building, or religious value, for example – and for each kind of non-artistic value the issue is whether works of artistic value (especially those of high or at least moderately high artistic value) might or do have some form (beneficial or harmful) of this other value and to what degree.

III

The non-specific values that are my concern in this essay are the social, moral, educational, and character-building value of art, and I begin with social value. If art has existed in every society and is likely to exist in any society, is this just to be accepted as a fact, albeit an explicable fact, about a human world? Or is it to be welcomed precisely because art introduces into a society artefacts and roles that are beneficial to that society? Or should it be regretted because art has a tendency to divorce itself from moral and social values, to distract people from what really matters in human life, and to encourage people to lead lives that are inimical to human flourishing?⁶ And if the first of these should be so, what is art's beneficial

⁴ What the usual formulation does not bring out is what I especially intend to examine: whether, for the moral, educational, social, and character-building values that are the object of my focus, there is a correlation of some sort between the making and/or the appreciation of works of high artistic value and a high degree of this other form of value.

⁵ I have expounded my conception of the specific value of art in part I of my *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music* (London: Allen Lane, 1995), and my *Aesthetic Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 90–101.

⁶ The truth is that in general it doesn't, but in particular cases it might. The danger of being seduced by beauty is always a possibility, most powerfully represented in literature by Jean des Esseintes (in Huysmans's *À Rebours*) – his character being modelled to some extent on that of Comte Robert de Montesquiou – who comes to live a totally aestheticized life (of a very strange kind).

social role; in virtue of which of its features is it suited to play this role; and just how important is this role?

But the question 'What is the social value of art?', like many other questions that might be raised about the significance of art in human life or the role of art in society, has no answer. A definite answer is precluded by the generality of the question. For if we understand a society as a community of people living together in a particular region and bound together, to a greater or lesser degree, by shared customs, laws and organizations, then the question as it stands is rendered null by a host of facts. In the first place, there are many kinds of society (authoritarian, democratic, pre-industrial, free-enterprise capitalist...), some undoubtedly better than others (although there is little agreement on what an ideal society would be like or, in many cases, whether one society is a better society than another); and there are many forms of human life within any particular society, many ways in which people lead their lives, willingly or unwillingly, art entering into some (in many different ways and to different degrees) but not all. Moreover, there are many forms of art, not all existing in every society (as in the case of the novel, which did not exist in Japan before the late Heian period, from the eighth to the twelfth century, or in Western societies before the eighteenth century); the various arts that exist in a society develop, flourish, stagnate, or wither in different ways and different times; for any society, works of art created by or present in the society vary from the finest to the worst; and the various art forms have different characters and, at different times or in different societies, have had different aims or have played different roles. So, on the one hand, there is no reason to expect that the value of the same art will be the same in different societies if it exists in different forms in these societies, and, on the other hand, the values of the different arts are likely to vary both within the same society and from society to society.⁷

Furthermore, there are different (positive) social values – qualities it is desirable for a society to have – and works of art have different social values, not only by being differently beneficial or harmful with respect to the same social value, but by advancing or retarding, raising or lowering, different social values, which themselves are of greater or lesser importance to society, or to a particular, or particular kind of, society. Then again parts of a society might benefit from art, or art of a certain kind, or particular works of art, and other parts not, the total effect

⁷ Rousseau, in his 'Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre', provides a detailed illustration of how the introduction of an art form – in this case the theatre – into a society will have very different effects, harmful in a number of ways for one society, beneficial in a number of ways for other societies. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*, trans. Allan Bloom (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 62–65.

perhaps strengthening or weakening overall the bonds in the society to a smaller or greater extent; and the dominant forces at work within a particular society at a certain time, which are likely to influence, for good or bad, the kind or kinds of art produced in that society, perhaps encouraging those forms of art that express values they favour, or imposing their ideology on the arts by dictating what is acceptable, or at least neutralizing art by suppressing works of art contrary to their ideology, are liable to vary over time, the changes in these dominant forces bringing about changes in the arts, the influence of art on people in that society – insofar as it can be said to be the same society – thereby varying.

But there are many further facts about art and society that undermine simplistic views of the social value of art. For example, there are at least two significant ways in which works of art can have at the same time both positive and negative social values. In the first place, the social value of works of art produced within a society at a certain time might have a positive value for that society, encouraging its members to bond together and be happy about the society they live in, and yet have a negative value for another society – as with many Japanese prints of the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–95), which either glorify heroic Japanese soldiers or ridicule the Chinese by caricature. Secondly, any particular art form is likely, in a developed society, both to unite and separate members of the society – to unite those who appreciate the same works or kinds of work and to distance them from those who do not (as with the division within our society between those who appreciate classical music and those who listen to or perform only pop music). Furthermore, artists vary enormously in the social aims they intend or hope their works will effect or undermine, some having no such aims, others displaying a moral, political or religious bias. Moreover, whether a work produces a certain effect – one that it produces on some people, say – depends on the nature of the individual who responds to it (her intelligence, character, morality, religion, and the life she has led, for example) and on whether she understands or fails to understand it. And the strength and longevity of the effect will depend, not just on how she was, to a greater or lesser degree, affected by it, or by certain of its features, positively or negatively, on a certain occasion, but by how often and in what conditions she interacts with the work.⁸ And given that nowadays more or less anything can be deemed art, the effects of works of art are limitless in variety.

⁸ And what holds for social value holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for other kinds of value, insofar as these values are determined by the actual effects of the work on people, short- or long-term. The great variety of works of art, the different ways in which they achieve artistic value, the different temperaments, personalities, histories, and capacities of individuals, make any global connections between artistic value and any values not intrinsic to the experience of works unlikely. For moral value, see §§ IV–XVIII.

Finally, insofar as the social value of art concerns the effects of art on members of the society, there is an uncertainty about what should or should not be included in those effects. In an advanced society like our own the arts, in virtue of the prestige they have acquired, ramify through society in such a way that their very existence has innumerable consequences – in the first place, enabling people to make a living (as artists, teachers of art, orchestral musicians, programme writers, art critics, art historians, makers of musical instruments, aestheticians, attendants in art museums, architects, ballet dancers, picture restorers, music publishers, auctioneers, art dealers, paint producers, cinema projectionists, ...), but also providing hobbies, pastimes, entertainments, subjects of study, discoveries, and so on. If all of these influences on people's lives fall under the concept of the social value of art, then in such a society as ours art's social value will be highly variegated and enormous – as the social value of sport would be if everything involved in its present existence in our society were likewise to be included in that value. But if some of these influences should be excluded, on what principle? For example, if, as is claimed, some surgeons work better while 'listening' to some chosen music, should the benefit to them and their patients be included in the social value of those pieces of music? Or if, as seems to be the case, listening to music and music therapy can help people overcome a range of psychological and physical problems, is this part of music's social value? It is clear that no answer to these questions can be extracted from the bare concept of the social value of art.

IV

There are various ways in which art or some particular form or forms of art might be beneficial to a particular society. It might be conducive to (i) the survival and continuation of that society or (ii) the moral improvement of the society or (iii) the increase in happiness of some or all members of the society. By the moral improvement of a society I mean an increase in the morally good behaviour, thoughts, and feelings of its members, some or all. Whether the continuation of a society is a good thing depends on the nature of the society. But the moral improvement of a society is, as such, a good thing – likely in itself to effect an increase in happiness – and the increase in happiness of members of a society, if not brought about at the expense of those who were unhappy or relatively unhappy, making them even worse off, should be welcomed. So, for any given society, the vital question concerns the moral value of its arts – whether the arts within that society are, overall, conducive to the moral improvement of its members, and whether other works of art or art forms would or might fare better.⁹

⁹ I return to the issue of art and happiness in § XIX.

But just as there is no such thing as the social value of art, there is no such thing as the moral value of art. For, in the first place, not only are there different moralities, but it seems certain that there are moral issues about which there is no right view: there are actions that are not morally neutral (non-moral) but are neither morally right nor morally wrong. So in that sense there is no such thing as the (unique) right morality, that is, no single morality that is binding on everyone. Perhaps more importantly, there are different conceptions of the nature and compass of morality, of what is included in its domain and what makes something part of that domain. However, even if we leave the nature of morality aside for the moment, it is clear that, if progress with the issue of the moral value of art is to be made, the idea must be relativized, and relativized in a number of ways. That there are fundamental differences among the arts that affect their possible moral value can hardly be denied. For what any art form can achieve is determined by the resources available to it, and these are determined by the character of that art form. So there is no a priori reason to believe that the different art forms have the same moral value, or that the specific works within these forms have the same moral value, or that people of all kinds are susceptible to the moral value of works of art in the same way and to the same degree. In fact, the converse of each of these is manifestly the case.

V

In writing about the supposed beneficial moral effects of art on people, and in particular the moral effects of music, Goethe made this remark: 'But music cannot affect morality, nor can the other arts, and it would be wrong to expect them to do so.'¹⁰ His claim has five elements – morality, music, the other arts, a certain impossibility, and a mistaken expectation – and it moves from music to all the arts, and from the assertion that art cannot affect morality to its being wrong to expect it to affect morality. It might appear to be a wild assertion with only a grain of truth in it. But I believe, first of all, that Goethe's claim that art cannot affect morality – and he meant that it cannot affect morality beneficially – is manifestly true of many, if not all, forms of art and many, if not all, works of art. And if the 'cannot' is changed to a 'does not', then the claim applies even more widely, and in fact on one reading it is, for just about every member of a certain large segment of the population, true of all art. Furthermore, I shall explain why his claim that it would be wrong to expect the arts to affect morality is also true. Moreover, I shall argue that this lack of a significant connection with a beneficial

¹⁰ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 'On Interpreting Aristotle's *Poetics*', in *Goethe: The Collected Works*, vol. 3, *Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. John Gearey, trans. Ellen and Ernest H. von Nardroff (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 199.

moral effect is not a defect in art or something to be regretted, undermining its status as an important human endeavour, as playing a significant role in human life: it is not a truth about art that lowers the value that we, or at least some or most of us, attribute to art. On the contrary, it directs attention to the nature of the irreplaceable role of art in human life and the important kind of value that, as art, all fine art possesses, a value that morality as such lacks.

I begin, as Goethe does, with music and the impossibility claim: music cannot affect morality.

VI

What we make of the impossibility claim depends on our conception of music and our understanding of morality. How is music to be understood? How is morality to be understood? There are, of course, different kinds of musical form: music combined with words (vocal music), music combined with drama as well (opera) or combined with dance (ballet), music combined with film, and music uncombined. And, as I have already indicated, there are different conceptions of morality. But if, on the one hand, music is understood as what is sometimes characterized as absolute music, that is, purely instrumental music (without a narrative programme), music that lacks an extra-musical representational content that the appreciative listener must grasp in listening to it, and, on the other hand, morality is understood as a matter of what ought (and ought not) to be done, of how, taking into account and giving due weight to the interests of others, we ought to behave in the particular circumstances we find ourselves in and how in general we ought to regard, feel about, and behave towards people, given their own nature, behaviour, attitudes, and feelings towards others, then it would seem clear that there is no significant connection between music and morality.¹¹ For absolute music, which includes much of the finest purely instrumental music of the last 350 years, does not deal with any moral issues, with anything that is morally right or wrong, or with morally good or bad people. Lacking any propositional or representational content it does not in any way indicate what actions, thoughts, or feelings it morally endorses or proscribes, either in general or in particular situations, and it does not express a moral stance or any morally admirable qualities of character (such as justice or honesty). Hence it has no

¹¹ This is intended to include how we ought to feel about ourselves, given how we have acted towards others on a certain occasion or what our motivation was in acting in that way. I have nothing against the inclusion of animals, birds, fish, insects, and even all sentient creatures in the domain of morality, that is, as objects not subjects. But that extension is not relevant here. One inadequacy of the conception of morality that I have outlined is that it does not embrace supererogatory actions. But this defect does not affect any of the conclusions I reach about art and morality.

disposition to make appreciative listeners or performers morally better or worse people, any moral effect it has being fortuitous, not intrinsic to the appreciation of the music.¹² In particular the idea that fine music corresponds to what is morally admirable, poor music to what is morally undesirable, is baseless. (If absolute music were to affect morality it would be like Mozart's magic flute – and that, of course, is magic.)

VII

The most obvious extension of the argument to the other arts is that, given the conception of morality outlined above, the conclusion that absolute music can have no moral effect on people applies with equal force to all other forms of non-representational art. This includes abstract painting, for example, and also all pure non-representational architecture – architecture considered as art, architecture evaluated not just by how well it performs its function but by how well its appearance fits that function.¹³ It also includes all non-representational works of the minor, 'decorative' arts (jewellery and other bodily adornments, ceramics, rugs and carpets, the art of garden design ...). If the non-representationality of absolute music deprives it of the ability to have a moral effect on people, no form of non-representational art can have such an effect.

But this conclusion is not restricted to non-representational art forms or works: the conclusion applies just as obviously to, for example, a great many of the representational works of the non-temporal visual art forms. For although these do have a representational content, the representational content is devoid of anything that would endow the work with a morally relevant character: it is the absence of a moral character entailed by non-representational art, not the non-representational nature in itself, that ensures that such works are morally null. Three kinds of artistic depiction – whether paintings, drawings, wood-block prints, engravings, etchings, or lithographs (for example) – are good illustrations of this truth. I shall briefly use the term 'painting' to cover all forms of depiction and the three kinds I have in mind are landscape, still life, and portrait.

There are, of course, many kinds of landscape painting. For centuries the depicted landscape of a painting served as a frame for human presence or activity, the frame perhaps having a character thought to be appropriate to the nature of

¹² Mere associations between a piece of music and something that might be of moral significance, whether the association is personal or established (as with a national anthem), are here irrelevant.

¹³ Architectural works have often had artistic representational elements (statues, for example) built into them, often for decorative purposes. Insofar as this is so, such a work is not a work of pure non-representational architecture.

the human scene depicted, strengthening its impact or appeal, or perhaps dominating the scene and constituting the primary appeal of the picture (as with, for example, Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with the Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah*). And some landscape paintings (Van Gogh's *The Sower*, for example) constitute celebrations of humble activities of rural life (and so have potential social value). Accordingly many landscape paintings are not 'pure' landscapes but are representations of a landscape in which a human scene, perhaps of some moral, ethical, social significance, is taking place. By a pure landscape painting I mean one in which there is no human presence in the landscape. This requirement can be understood in stronger or weaker ways. It could be understood to exclude not just human beings, but human artefacts of any kind or any things worked by humanity. This strong reading would exclude Monet's *Grainstacks* and *Water Lilies* series, and also many depicted landscapes, since landscapes depicted have often been landscapes shaped or created by humanity, perhaps to enhance their beauty, landscapes that are themselves works of art. Nevertheless, there are 'purely natural' landscape paintings, even of virgin nature. But whether the idea of a pure landscape painting is construed widely or narrowly, pure landscape paintings, lacking any moral content, are not suited to bring about moral improvement in people.¹⁴

Many still-life paintings are intended to be taken at face value and, having nothing to do with morality, are thereby entirely ineffective in morally improving people. But a still life that is a memento mori¹⁵ will have a moral, or at least an advisory, content. Intended as a warning or reminder not to waste one's life on trivial matters, the content is acceptable (but perhaps not many of us need the reminder). Intended in the Christian sense – as a *vanitas* – which represents human life on earth as in itself of little value and advocates focus on an afterlife, it is misguided and, if at all effective, regrettable.

Most portraits have a negligible ability to bring about moral improvement in those who perceive them (even if they are aware of the identity of the person depicted). If you walk through the National Portrait Gallery in London you will fail to detect any pictures with a moral representational content or that are expressive of a moral stance or moral character, except, perhaps, for Benjamin Haydon's monumental painting *The Anti-slavery Society Convention, 1840*, which contains

¹⁴ This is true also of (i) paintings of pure nature that are not landscape paintings, that contain no element of landscape (as with Constable's paintings of clouds), (ii) depictions of animals, birds, fish, or insects and flowers (as with Koson's or Bairei's, or Ono's numerous wood-block prints).

¹⁵ Still life is not the only kind of painting that can function as a memento mori. For example, Turner's *Sunset and Moonrise (Leicester Abbey)* seems to have been intended to be such a thing.

numerous representations of leading figures of the movement, and is more a depiction of the Convention than a portrait. And the portraits of Thomas Paine (author of *The Rights of Man*) and of Mary Wollstonecraft (author of *Vindication of the Rights of Women*), even if you are aware of their courageous contributions to morality, are not depicted in such a manner as to capture or express the character of their moral views or their moral self, and so – except for their bringing these wonderful persons to mind – are as unable to affect morality as is the *Mona Lisa*.¹⁶

The fact is that the capacity for representational paintings to have a morally improving effect is hindered by their being able to represent only an unchanging visual scene, a frozen image, how something might look or is supposed to look at a certain moment.

If we now turn briefly to the art of sculpture, which today includes both figurative and nonfigurative works, the prospect for moral improvement is no better than that of the varieties of depiction just considered. For, in the first place, nonfigurative works are as such divorced from morality. But from the Greeks onwards, most sculptures have been of people, often of just a single person, real or imagined. And such sculptures could have a moral aspect, so that in principle they might be able to bring about a moral improvement in those who admire them. But in fact either these works lack a moral aspect – that is nearly always the case – or they are manifestly unfitted to effect moral improvement in anyone.¹⁷ And this applies even to such works as Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes*, or the *Laocoon* group, or to those Greek statues exemplifying *kalokagathia*, the union of beauty and goodness, outer and inner perfection.

VIII

It is, of course, the apparent existence within at least some art forms, painting in particular, of various kinds of work that have higher or lower potential non-artistic values – religious, moral, social, educational – that gave rise to the idea of a hierarchy within an art, works of one kind being more important than works of another kind, and so on down to the least important, as with the classical ranking of history paintings as being the most important, then portraits, scenes of everyday life, landscape, animal paintings, and finally still life. And if it really is true that works of one kind within an art form can possess a moral value unobtainable by works of another kind within that art, then a work of the first

¹⁶ There are ways in which a work of art might affect a person morally but not in virtue of its particular artistic character, or even its status as art (the fact that it is a work of art). But these are of no relevance to the question.

¹⁷ I except the religious: certain works (a *Pietà* by Michelangelo, for example) might have a positive moral impact (for a short time) on certain sensitive Christians. But of course atheists are capable of appreciating such works just as well as the religious.

kind that possesses that value is thereby in that respect a more important thing than an equally fine work of the second kind.¹⁸ And if works of one art form have a character that endows them with potential moral value whereas works of another art form do not, then works of the first art form that have that moral value are thereby in that respect more important than their equals in artistic merit of the second art form – so that it will be true not only that there are hierarchies within certain art forms but that there are hierarchies across art forms. These hierarchies would, of course, be moral hierarchies, not absolute hierarchies, not hierarchies true of all non-artistic values, and these moral hierarchies would be unlikely to coincide with hierarchies of other non-artistic values – religious, social, ethical, or educational, for example – so that works within a particular art form that rank low with respect to morality, or an entire form of art that does so, might have a higher place within a religious, ethical, social, or educational hierarchy.

IX

But – to return to the main line of thought – of course there are paintings that have a moral aspect of some kind, depicting a scene of moral relevance, a tragic situation, or an heroic action, perhaps, and, it will be said, such paintings can and do affect morality. And, it will also be said, surely the moral ineffectiveness of art does not apply to the literary arts, the novel and the drama, in particular, nor to opera or song or film as art. For works within these arts almost always do have, in some form or other, a moral aspect. Now it is certainly true that many works in these art forms do have a moral aspect and so such works are, as far as that goes, such that they could affect morality, by which is meant that they could in principle have a morally improving effect. But the important question is whether they do have such an effect, or are likely to do so, and, if so, on which people and by what means; whether they are, in comparison with other kinds of cause, a particularly effective means of achieving this moral improvement; and whether there is a strong connection between a work of art's specific value – its value as art – and its moral value. And I must at once confess that no such work, no opera, no song, no painting, film, novel, play, or poem, has, since I grew up, ever improved me morally, and not because I am morally perfect – far from it. And my own view is, in essence, that works such as these – those with a moral aspect – although in principle capable, in virtue of their moral aspect, of improving a person morally, are either entirely unfitted to bring about a moral improvement, or unlikely to do

¹⁸ It will be noticed that I have expressed this hierarchy not as a hierarchy of artistic value. This may well be historically false, a good work of the highest rank being thought thereby to be a better work of art than a good work of a lower rank.

so, at least with anyone who is grown-up, with a certain knowledge of the world and who embraces a relatively decent morality.¹⁹ In any case they compare unfavourably with other stimulants to moral improvement.

X

But I must now clarify the idea of a work of art's possessing positive moral value (its value in effecting moral improvement). What do I mean by the possession of positive moral value? I do not mean that it is integral to the appreciative experience of the work – the experience of understanding it and responding to it as its artistic value merits – that this engages a person's moral self in such a way as to change it for the better. This, I believe, would imply that no work of art possesses positive moral value.²⁰ Nor do I mean that a work with a (positive) moral aspect thereby has the disposition to induce in those who recognize that character a moral improvement proportional to the work's perceived artistic value – the better the work the greater the moral improvement. This would seem to be straightforwardly false. Instead I mean this: a work of art possesses positive moral value if and only if its character is such that the appreciative experience of it – the experience of understanding it and responding to it as its artistic value merits – engages a person's moral self in such a manner as is likely (or is disposed) to change it for the better.²¹ But note first of all that this account does not specify how long the change must be for, whether temporarily or for ever. I shall here leave this blank – although I shall return to it briefly and rather obliquely in a different context – but clearly if the change were to be only momentary, while the work was being experienced or reflected upon, it would count for nothing: it must have an effect that endures for some time after the person has ceased to engage with the work. Note also that this account of positive moral value introduces a relativity into the idea, for as it stands it applies only to those whose moral self is lacking in that element that the work has the power to affect positively. If you don't lack it, you won't be improved morally by the work. If you are already at the height

¹⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* undoubtedly had the power to convince some relatively unsophisticated people of the evils of slavery.

²⁰ It would certainly imply this in the morally better person sense I later introduce: the appreciation of art is not such that, in appreciating a (fine) work of art, your moral character is thereby of necessity changed for the better or at least reinforced, so that afterwards you are, for at least some length of time, improved or strengthened morally, having become a morally better person. This is not to say that a work cannot have such an effect on any particular person or number of persons.

²¹ If a work's moral aspect affects its artistic value – positively for an acceptable, negatively for an unacceptable, morality – then all those who do not embrace what is an acceptable moral aspect of a work will not be able to respond to the work as its artistic value merits.

of morality that the work's character is such as to raise people to, your moral self will not be affected by it; and if you are morally perfect, no work will make you better. Furthermore, those whose moral self does lack the element in question will constitute a very mixed bunch, a portion of them (the selfish, cynical, unscrupulous, avaricious, super-rich tax evaders, con men, and so on), even if they have an interest in, and the ability to appreciate, a work, being more or less invulnerable to moral improvement. Given the diversity of human nature, this relativity must be built into what the possession of moral value consists in. So a work of art might for one person possess moral value but not for another.²² In what follows I will largely be talking about relatively intelligent and informed grown-up people.

In what ways can our moral self be improved? Obviously, by introducing or strengthening desirable aspects, weakening or eliminating undesirable aspects. But what are these? First, we might come to assign a greater weight to morality in our lives in the sense of our becoming more committed, and so more likely, to act as we see morality to require it. For example, it often takes courage to say or do what we see to be the morally right thing and we might become more courageous. Or we could come to give a higher priority to morality by assigning greater amounts of time and money to the relief of suffering or the prevention of morally wrong behaviour (by giving more to charity or by abandoning one's settled life and fighting in some other part of the world for a morally right cause, for instance). Second, if we have mistaken moral beliefs (about homosexuality or racial stereotypes, for instance) or see nothing wrong with certain kinds of morally wrong behaviour (exploiting some loophole in the law to avoid paying taxes), we might come to see their wrongness; or we might become aware of moral faults (defects of character) or moral virtues that we did not previously recognize; or we might become better at balancing one factor against another in coming to a moral decision, perhaps about the moral virtues, vices or limitations of particular people or kinds of person; or we might become better at detecting the morally relevant features of a situation – in which case we would become morally enlightened or more morally perceptive. In short, there is, on the one hand, the capacity to make better moral judgements, and, on the other hand, how great a command of your life your moral self possesses, that is, the depth of your commitment to morality, how great your commitment to morality is, how great your liability to be motivated by your morality is.

²² In this essay I am concerned primarily with what I have called positive moral value, that is, beneficial, not harmful, moral effects. But the possibility of harmful moral effects of art – a major concern of Plato (see § XVIII) – is certainly real.

XI

Now a poor or mediocre work of art is unlikely to have a positive moral effect on one who experiences it *as* poor or mediocre.²³ So putting aside fortuitous reasons for moral improvement, we can focus just on good works experienced as being good. But it cannot be simply because a fine work of art has a moral aspect that the work possesses moral value: the morality expressed (if any particular moral stance is expressed) might well be one that you (and most others) already fully embrace – isn't that usually the case? – and your commitment to that morality might well be in no way reinforced or strengthened (your commitment needs no such thing). And it is clear that very many representational works of art with a moral aspect do not enlighten us morally in any sense, perhaps presenting at best only types of people, forms of conduct, specific thoughts, attitudes, circumstances that we have never encountered or never thought much about, but which readily fall under general categories of morally good or bad behaviour, or morally undesirable feelings or thoughts, that we already recognize.²⁴ So although these works engage our moral sensitivities, they are not thereby likely to improve or otherwise change our moral selves. However, given the immense variety of people, societies, positions in society, or situations that might arise, there are innumerable possibilities against which our moral views – often formed on relatively simple grounds – have not been tested, exposure to which might lead to a beneficial adjustment of our morality. And reflection on this fact leads, I believe, to the conclusion that the kind of (representational) art best suited to stimulating moral improvement is narrative art, some members of this wide range being more promising than others: at the less promising end narrative painting, ballet, and song, in the middle such temporal art forms as opera and theatre, then film, perhaps, and, finally, at the most promising end, literature, or at least the novel. Why this order? Because, in the first place, the represented narrative content of a ballet, song, or narrative painting – even one that depicts so-called sequential narrative – is extraordinarily thin in comparison with that of works of the other narrative arts, so that its likelihood to effect moral enlightenment is correspondingly lower. And, secondly, the principal temporal

²³ It certainly is possible that a less good film or novel, one that is more black and white, the good being very good, the bad very bad, some of the good suffering, dying even, but the bad eventually being defeated, might have a more powerful effect than a better work on certain people in energizing or intensifying hatred of the bad. But this is unlikely for those who recognize the work's lack of artistic merit.

²⁴ Of course, among these works there may well be some that provide non-moral knowledge unknown to some who engage with the work, enlightening them about the character of forms of life or possible kinds of people they have never encountered, and this might bring about a change in the moral beliefs of these people. So although these works possess no moral value for others, they might do so for those who are ignorant of the facts.

narrative arts – every opera of Mozart, Verdi, and Wagner, for example – are, I believe, in general of such a nature as to arouse emotions in those who appreciate them, but do not have the resources necessary to be (even minimally) effective in moral education, to change our moral judgements for the better, or to increase our moral perceptiveness. Here it is essential to realize that effects on one's emotions are not thereby effects on one's values or character: scary films scare but do not thereby alter one's self beneficially or harmfully. The fact that such emotions as pity, sympathy, or horror are aroused by morally relevant aspects of works of art is in itself only an indication of what one's morality is: it certainly doesn't establish that we have thereby been morally improved in some way, even if (although this is unlikely) it may be necessary for some people to have their emotions so stirred from time to time if they are not to decline morally. Furthermore, there is a particular reason why morally appropriate emotions often flow so freely in the experience of art, especially dramatic art (theatre and film): there is no demand on a spectator to take action to mitigate the misfortune of the characters represented on stage or film (since there is no possibility of doing so). And this is conducive to the arousal of sympathetic emotions where the arousal is indicative, not of an improved moral self, but of one's being such as to experience the right emotions to events of the kind represented, a reassurance of one's humanity, without any possible price to pay. Finally, the narrative art most fitted to bringing about beneficial changes in our moral judgements or perceptiveness is that which has the ability to represent in adequate detail and complexity the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of characters interacting in a multitude of ways in a variety of situations, which fact both explains what I have said about the temporal narrative arts and implies that the novel (rather than drama or poetry) occupies pride of place²⁵ – as has often been emphasized.

XII

So let us consider the claim that in the reading of novels of a certain kind – novels that are not morally simple, novels that might require concentrated study and considerable reflection to come to terms with, novels that because of the complex or unusual characters or situations involved provoke one into thinking about whether the represented actions, thoughts, and feelings are right or wrong, good or bad²⁶ – and in imagining the states of affairs the narrative presents and reacting

²⁵ One obvious exception to this general rule is ancient Greek tragedy, which was unequalled in its capacity to encourage reflection on important moral issues.

²⁶ Compare Bernard Williams's conception of 'dense' fiction, the kind of fiction that he thought could significantly help moral philosophy (despite the dangers he identifies). See his 'The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics', in *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 49–59.

emotionally to the represented actions and feelings of the characters, their thoughts sometimes, perhaps, being presented from the inside, encouraging one to imagine what it would be like to be a particular character or kind of person in a certain situation, we might find ourselves, through the mechanisms of sympathy and empathy, forming a correct moral judgement about kinds of people, forms of behaviour, what ought or ought not to be done in certain situations, now holding a true rather than a mistaken moral view or no view at all; or we might have acquired or improved the ability to identify moral defects or virtues in people we might encounter – insincerity or true compassion, for example – that otherwise we would not have recognized; or we might have become better at detecting the morally relevant features of a situation and/or weighing the importance of the various features in coming to a sound moral decision, so that our morality now encompasses a greater proportion of truths, our moral ability being more sophisticated or refined.

Now one should be prepared to allow that these are ways in which narrative art, and especially the novel, might be of such a nature as to be disposed to affect morality, to play a positive role in moral education, and in that sense to improve our morality, although it should be noted that this does not imply that you can learn from art something about morality that you can't learn just as easily from elsewhere, and even if one takes away from a novel a sharpened discrimination of virtues and vices as realized by the characters in the work, this is unlikely to be readily applicable to the varieties of people one encounters in the rest of one's life, of whom, in general, one will lack the access to their thoughts and feelings necessary to categorize them with precision, so that an advance in one's moral education might well never be reflected in action through no appropriate opportunity for exercising it turning up.²⁷ But – putting the doubts aside – even if this is so, this is not to say that we have become morally better people. You do not become a morally better person simply by having a better morality or by coming to realize forms or occasions of immorality previously unknown to you or by acquiring the ability to detect moral faults to which previously you would have been blind. Or, to put it differently, a morally perceptive person is not thereby a morally better person. In fact, his perceptiveness might make him a morally worse person than a less perceptive person: if he does not act as his perceptiveness should lead him to act then he will be morally at fault in a way that a less perceptive person would not be even though he acted in the same way.

²⁷ The moral education that literature can provide is best articulated and defended in the writings of Noël Carroll. See, for example, his 'Art and the Moral Realm' and 'The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge', in *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175–200, 201–34.

XIII

What this brings out is that the idea I have introduced of a work's possessing moral value, which turns on the notion of a person's moral self being changed for the better, needs to be pulled apart. As it stands, it covers three different possibilities: a person's having a better (that is, truer) morality, a person's being more morally perceptive or enlightened, and a person's becoming a morally better person (their moral self more strongly commanding their life). Neither having a better morality nor being more morally perceptive than some other person makes you a morally better person than her. Hence in one sense a work of art might possess positive moral value, and in another sense not: it might possess the capacity to induce in one who appreciates it a change in their moral beliefs from false to true, or it might endow such a person with a superior capacity to distinguish what is morally right from what is morally wrong, or it might make him or her a morally better person. Or, of course, it might possess positive moral value in more than one of these senses. But perhaps the most important sense is the third I have identified – making one a morally better person (by assigning a greater priority to morality in one's life): unless we have become a morally better person, the work has not, in the most important sense, had a morally improving effect on us. In fact this is the principal sense I had in mind when I earlier declared that no work of art has ever improved me morally.²⁸

And let me now state what I take to be the stark truth. Although I have made certain concessions to the view that art can effect moral improvement, isn't it true for many of us that a fine novel, a play, an opera, a poem, or painting is much more likely to encourage us – those of us who love art – to spend time reading other fine literature, attending other plays, looking at more paintings, or listening to further operas, rather than devoting ourselves to the advancement of morality in the world?²⁹ And isn't it true that the keener we are on art, the likelier this is? And, certainly, the amount of time spent reading fiction, watching films, looking at pictures or whatever is unlikely to be proportional in any person's case to the moral gain of becoming a morally better person from appreciating those works. Not often could one pick up a novel and think sincerely that there's nothing else that one could be doing – something that is perhaps easily within one's powers – that would be of greater benefit to others or that would be more conducive to

²⁸ Just as the positive moral value of a work of art, understood in this third sense, is, I believe, nil or negligible, so, I believe, is its negative moral value.

²⁹ It is obvious that a fine novel with a moral aspect might well not encourage one who properly appreciates it to live better, to change his life, to reform his character. An extreme case would be an intelligent and sensitive reader, disappointed in his life, who is addicted to fiction, reading compulsively, using it as a form of escape from the real world.

making one a better person, than reading the novel: charity for the poor, ignorant, or suffering is for most of us always present. If what I have said is true, then in fact the works we admire might be said to have potentially harmed us morally, by their attractiveness encouraging us to spend time and money on the arts that could instead have been devoted to the poor. However this might be, I am, of course, not denying that a novel or film might increase a person's sympathy for the poor or the disabled or the vulnerable and this might lead the person to be more charitable – to deny this would be to neglect the relativity built into the idea of a work's possessing positive moral value – although I must admit to being sceptical about the longevity of such an effect, and it seems no more likely, in fact it seems very much less likely, to be brought about by a painting, film, or novel than by a real life situation or by coming across a plea for support from a charity, or by seeing on a television news programme images of people in one or another country starving or with their homes destroyed in civil war, or in many other ways. The truth is that there is no good reason to believe that works of art can bring about moral improvements not otherwise achievable, or more quickly or more long-lasting than anything else: on the contrary, other stimuli to moral improvement are more effective than works of art. In short, art is a poor tool for bringing about moral improvement and the moral value (power) of works of art has been greatly overrated.³⁰ For in general as adults we engage with works of art for reasons other than moral ones, with our moral selves more or less fully formed, certainly judging and responding to works of art that have a moral character in terms of our own morality and moral self, but not finding ourselves thereby changed into morally better people, our disposition to act in accordance with our moral views perhaps in general changing less and less as we grow older.

XIV

But at this point it is necessary to reconsider the relation between art and morality, for the conception of morality from which I have drawn conclusions about the possible moral value of the various art forms is not the only conception relevant to an assessment of their non-artistic value in human life, especially to their social value. And, particularly in the case of absolute music, things look rather different if morality is understood, as it sometimes is, in at least one of the senses that can be given to the idea of ethics (deriving from the Greek *ēthos*, meaning 'character'). For there is an important line of thought, traceable back to Plato and Aristotle, that claims that purely instrumental music need not have any

³⁰ This claim rests on the notion of moral value that I introduced in § X and have been working with ever since. The claim will be qualified later when the restriction is removed (see §§ XVII, XVIII).

propositional or representational content in order to have an important human value – namely, an ethical value. Plato wrote little about the value of (non-representational) music considered in itself, but he did use his conclusions about the acceptable matter and manner of poetic narration to determine what kinds of melody or musical mode, instrument, and rhythm are socially desirable or undesirable. For music, he maintained, must accord with acceptable poetry, so that the only acceptable musical modes are those which ‘imitate the utterances and the accents’ (or ‘tones and cadences’) of the good and brave, and the only acceptable rhythms are those of ‘a life that is orderly and brave’, all else being banned from his ideal Republic.³¹ And, of course, orderliness and courage are valuable qualities of character – qualities that are desirable for human beings to have – but they are not in the narrow sense specifically moral virtues: an athlete (a boxer, for example) could be both orderly and brave (in the ring).³² For Aristotle music was a mimetic art form, segments of music being in some sense analogues or mimetic equivalents of certain aspects of human life, the most important object of musical mimesis³³ being *ēthos*, or ‘character’, where this is understood to cover, so it seems, more than one kind of psychological characteristic, above all both qualities of what we would call character (courage, self-discipline, resilience, generosity, gentleness, enthusiasm, strength and weakness of will) but also states of emotion (anger, sorrow).³⁴ Accordingly, music presents musical likenesses of the nature of human feelings and qualities of character,³⁵ and musical mimesis is a matter of some kind of cross-categorical likeness perception in the sense that the music is experienced as being like these ethical characteristics. In other words, music possesses qualities that are mimetic equivalents of, or are

³¹ Plato, *Republic* 399a, 400a.

³² A desirable quality of character that is not specifically moral may nevertheless be a quality that it is necessary for a morally good person to possess, at least to a certain degree – as with courage.

³³ Perhaps the finest exposition and examination of the concept of mimetic art is Stephen Halliwell’s *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

³⁴ In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes virtues of character from virtues of thought (such as wisdom or intelligence), virtues of character being a matter of having the right desires, feelings, pleasures, and pains on the right occasions and towards the right objects (or a matter of making the right decisions). So for Aristotle there was an intimate link between qualities of character and feelings, and perhaps this explains the rather unclear oscillation between the two in his brief remarks about ethical qualities of music in the *Politics*. In fact he accepted the division of melodies into ethical melodies, melodies of action, and passionate or inspiring melodies, thereby recognizing that music might display characteristics of action, or passion, rather than ethical qualities. And his view was that in education ethical melodies must be preferred, melodies of action (and passionate/ecstatic melodies?) for catharsis, passionate/ecstatic melodies for intellectual enjoyment, relaxation and recreation after exertion. See *Politics* 8.7.1341b32–42a17.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, 8.5.1340a.

experienced as being akin or corresponding to or resembling, qualities of 'character', this being shown, he believed, by the fact that our mental state is changed when we listen to music that possesses such qualities, the music inducing in us an experience of the corresponding qualities of feeling or emotion.³⁶

Leaving aside the particularities of Plato's and Aristotle's views – and now substituting the current language of expression for that of musical mimesis – the principal idea in the line of thought leading back to them is that music can express or be expressive of many valuable qualities of character and many kinds of associated emotion that are not specifically moral, and this expression endows absolute music with a potential ethical value in the sense of a human psychological good – something that it is good for a person to possess or experience.

XV

It is noticeable that the line of thought I have identified has changed direction in recent years: whereas Plato and Aristotle emphasize the musical expression of qualities of character, the contemporary obsession has been with the musical expression of emotion.³⁷ But whether the emphasis is on character or emotion, the line of thought is plagued by a swarm of problems. I shall mention just the most immediately relevant ones. First, character traits: there certainly are character traits that are valuable but not specifically morally good, but precisely which valuable qualities of character can music express – not all, surely (perseverance, tenacity, tolerance, amiability, reliability, patience, resourcefulness, generosity, or courage, for example) – and why? And, presumably, if music can express valuable qualities of character, it can also express worthless qualities, but which such qualities – not all surely (vanity, gullibility, or obstinacy, for example) – and why?³⁸ Now, emotions: Which emotions can music express? Can music express emotions of every kind? It is, I believe, generally thought not to be able to express emotion of every kind. And there certainly are plausible candidates: consider, for instance, shame, guilt, embarrassment, resentment, envy, jealousy, admiration, hatred, schadenfreude, and pride. On the face of it, it would seem

³⁶ Acquiescing in Plato's view that music, in virtue of its possession of such qualities, arouses emotions in the listener (these emotions affecting the listener for good or bad), Aristotle, it seems, used his notion of *catharsis* (about which there is not sufficient evidence to ensure a correct interpretation) to oppose certain of Plato's strictures (as it would seem clear that he did in the case of tragedy). See *ibid.*, 8.7.1342a.

³⁷ As I have indicated, there are traces of the musical mimesis of emotion in what has come down to us as Aristotle's text.

³⁸ For Aristotle (see note 34) we could add the question, 'What are the corresponding emotions supposedly aroused by music that is experienced as being mimetic of a quality of character?'

that pure instrumental music cannot express at least some of these emotions. But if music can express some emotions and cannot express others, why not? And does music that expresses an emotion thereby have an ethical value, no matter what the emotion may be, or must the emotion expressed be of certain specifiable kinds, and if so which and why? There certainly are emotions that in themselves have neither a positive nor a negative ethical value (anger and joy, for example). If the emotion must be a human good, a good thing for someone to feel, isn't that often or even always a matter of the circumstance in which a person feels the emotion and the object towards which it is directed, and how might the circumstance and the object be indicated by the music?

But even with correct answers to these questions, there would still be an important issue left, for the fact that music may possess an ethical quality in the sense we are concerned with, that is, being expressive of character or emotion, in itself says nothing about the ethical *effect* that such music may have on performers or listeners. Unless we can make progress with the claim that through its expression of qualities of character or emotion music has effective ethical value, a value with the power to strengthen the presence or encourage the development of that quality or purify or refine it in listeners or do something else that is ethically valuable, we will not be able to understand how exactly we might benefit ethically from music that possesses or expresses ethical qualities. And to get clear about this (and to answer all the questions successfully) we would need something that we at present lack – namely, an accepted answer to the most fundamental question of them all, 'What exactly is it for music to possess or express qualities of character and emotion?' – a question that, despite the great deal of work that has been addressed to the emotion part of it in recent years, has failed to receive any agreed answer, even the answer (that I have advocated) that there is no single phenomenon that falls under this characterization, but a variety of phenomena, no one of which has the right to be regarded as *the* phenomenon. Without an answer to that fundamental question, the connection, if any, between the musical possession of an ethical quality in the sense we are concerned with and the ethical effect that such music may have on performers or listeners will be shrouded in darkness.

XVI

However, some progress can be made by considering what kind of effect might be produced by a work experienced in the various ways specified by the competing conceptions of the musical expression of *ethos* (emotion or character), what would be the likelihood of such an effect on one who engages with the work, and, most importantly, whether the effect is one that is conducive

to ethical improvement (or deterioration). On the one hand there is the musical expression of emotion, on the other the musical expression of character.

Let us consider first the expression of emotion (mood or feeling), which has attracted (amongst others) conceptions of its nature that are based on the arousal of emotion, the imagination of emotion, resemblance to how an emotion feels or to the expression of emotion, or some combination of elements of these different kinds. Then, in the first place, resemblance theories of musical expression would seem not to be well fitted to bring about ethical improvement. There are two possibilities: the resemblance is either to the human expression of emotion or to the experience of the emotion itself. If perceiving a piece of music as being expressive of an emotion is merely a matter of experiencing the music as resembling the vocal expression of that emotion, or as resembling the non-vocal expression of the emotion, it seems, to put it mildly, unlikely that such an experience would issue in any ethical improvement in the listener, in particular an improvement in the appropriate occasions for feeling the emotion, or the strength or purity of the experience of the emotion.³⁹ For a perceived resemblance between music and the vocal or bodily expression of an emotion has nothing in the perception relevant to bringing about ethical improvements of these or any other kinds. If, on the other hand, hearing a piece of music as being expressive of an emotion consists in hearing the music as resembling how that emotion feels, again there appears to be nothing in the experience that would be conducive to ethical improvement.

Arousal theories (simple or complex) would, it seems, fare no better. For either the emotion aroused by the music is the one that the music is heard to be expressive of or it is some other emotion. But if music heard as being emotionally expressive is (at least in part)⁴⁰ a matter of arousing the emotion in the listener, why should that be thought to be ethically valuable, for in general the kind of emotion music is heard to be expressive of will already be familiar to the listener and the musically aroused emotional experience will lack an object, unless – as it would not be with most kinds of emotion – the object is the music itself or some aspect of it (as when one is disgusted, thrilled, or disappointed by the music). For

³⁹ In general the right emotion to feel depends on the occasion and object of emotion. Perhaps some emotions (jealousy or envy, for example) are intrinsically undesirable to be experienced. But even if a piece of music can be heard as resembling the expression of envy or jealousy, it is highly unlikely to lower the likelihood of a listener experiencing that emotion in real life.

⁴⁰ It would be possible to add the arousal of the emotion to the likeness specified in the final resemblance view, as I have suggested in my *Values of Art*, 147. But although this might constitute a plausible account of the expressive perception of music, the addition would not thereby endow the combined experience with positive ethical value, even in the case of positive emotions.

the experience to be ethically valuable the emotion experienced would have to be either one that is generally beneficial for a person to experience (such, perhaps, as love) or one that is experienced as having an uncommon but desirable character – greater depth, purity, or sincerity, for example, than is usual: only if one of these is the case might the experience have a character that is such as to effect an ethical improvement in at least certain of those who experience the work as being expressive of emotion (in this first arousal sense). If the emotion aroused is some emotion other than the one the music is heard to be expressive of, then for it to be (partly) constitutive of hearing the music as being expressive of the expressed emotion it must be such that the specification of its nature involves the concept of the emotion expressed, as it would do if the emotion were a sympathetic or empathic response to the expressed emotion. But since the music is neither an experience of the emotion nor a bodily expression of the emotion, the response must be to an imagined occurrence of the emotion.

Perhaps, then, the experience of hearing music as being expressive of emotion is better thought of as being a function of the imagination, involving either imagining your experience of the music to be an experience of the emotion or at least imagining an experience of the emotion to be taking place, one that, perhaps, seems to you as if you are in its presence. But the first alternative, which involves imagining yourself to be undergoing an emotion – the emotion expressed – appears to provide no foundation for a beneficial ethical effect to be brought about. So the second alternative might appear more promising, for it allows the possibility of an emotional reaction to the imagined occurrence of emotion, and this would introduce a certain complexity into the imaginative experience of the music. There are two simple forms such a reaction might take: either you are infected with the emotion you are imagining or you are affected by that emotion in a sympathetic or antipathetic manner.⁴¹ Given that the emotion is not intrinsically undesirable, being infected with the emotion imagined might have a value that is denied you in real life, for, lacking an object and being determined by the progress of the music, you are acutely aware of the felt character of the emotion, and perhaps this character will have a rare depth or unusual sincerity, one that you have never experienced before and that, now that you have experienced it, you aspire to in your life outside music. If you experience a sympathetic response to the emotion expressed, then in a certain sense this might be the right response, for in general this might be a good response to the emotion (as sympathy is in general a good response to melancholy, grief, or unhappiness). And perhaps this might strengthen, at least for a short time,

⁴¹ See my 'Music and the Communication of Emotion', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989): 136.

the likelihood of your responding with the right emotion on an appropriate occasion in real life.

But whatever the truth of that might be, the expression by music of desirable character traits might well seem to be a better prospect for generating ethical improvement. For there is an immediate connection between what is expressed by music and what kind of person it is desirable to be, so that hearing music as having a desirable character trait might bring about or encourage that trait in you. However, here we come up against two difficulties. The first concerns the exact understanding of the notion of the musical expression of *ēthos*. All we have from Plato and Aristotle is that music possesses properties that are experienced as being mimetic equivalents of these ethical qualities, our mental state being changed when we listen to music and experience it as being so mimetic. As I have suggested, this represents musical mimesis as being a matter of some kind of cross-categorial likeness perception. But it does not explain why or how the desirable change in our mental state – some positive change in some aspect of our ‘character’ – takes place. However, if the change is supposed to be brought about by the experience of a resemblance between the music and the quality of character, the likelihood of this change taking place would seem to be no better than that for resemblance theories of the musical expression of emotion. The second difficulty is one that I have already mentioned: How many of the principal virtues of character that Aristotle distinguishes – bravery, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, ‘mildness’, truthfulness, wit, friendliness, justice, for example – or those desirable character traits that we ourselves recognize, can properly be thought of as being expressed by music? Very few, if any. The claims for the character-building property of music therefore look to be wild.

In addition to a possible beneficial effect of the emotional character of absolute music, it is instructive here to consider the possibility of a harmful effect. Sentimentality covers a great variety of conditions,⁴² one of which represents a sentimental emotion as being experienced with pleasure but not heartfelt (lacking both depth and sincerity). Roger Scruton, conceiving of the musical expression of emotion in terms of a sympathetic emotional response to what is imagined in the music, has rightly claimed that, just as sentimentality is a defect in a person’s character, the sentimentality of a piece of music is a defect in the music.⁴³ However,

⁴² See my *Values of Art*, 96.

⁴³ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 485–88. For a very different conception of sentimental music (as arousing a mixture of aesthetic joy with a moral grief), see Nietzsche’s insightful § 168, ‘Sentimentality in Music’, of ‘The Wanderer and His Shadow’, in *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 349.

a listener who perceives a piece of music as being sentimental (lacking depth and sincerity) will not thereby be harmed by it, and it is unlikely that a listener who likes the music but does not perceive it as being sentimental (and so does not appreciate it) will thereby be harmed by it. Furthermore, Scruton's conception of sentimentality, which he understands as a pretence to an emotion one does not truly feel in order to present oneself in a favourable light, deserving admiration or sympathy, appears to be over-demanding on a listener. For although a listener might hear a piece of music as being expressive of an emotion that is not truly felt, how would it be possible to hear in addition the underlying intention – of the music's imagined persona? – of presenting oneself in a favourable light, deserving admiration or sympathy? (And the same would apply if we were to replace Scruton's conception of sentimentality by Thomas Hurka's very different conception – 'caring too much about objects that don't merit it because you care too much about your caring about them'.)⁴⁴

So the conclusion must be that, if morality is understood as *ethos* rather than as what I earlier defined as 'morality', the moral value of absolute music will not be greatly altered: the only inherent connection that might possibly be significant is for music heard as being expressive of emotion in a certain manner involving the imagination. And, although I shall not attempt to demonstrate this here, I believe that the replacement of my first understanding of morality by this alternative would have little effect on my conclusions about the moral value of the other art forms or genres.⁴⁵

XVII

Much earlier I claimed that, for any given society, the vital question about how art or some particular form or forms of art might be beneficial to that society concerns the moral value of its arts – whether the arts within that society are, overall, conducive to the moral improvement (or the increase in happiness) of its members, and whether other works of art or art forms would or might fare better. It might be thought that, insofar as the morality aspect is concerned, the answer has been provided by the assessments I have already carried out of the possible or likely moral value of works of the various art forms. But in fact this is wide of the mark. For my notion of the (positive) moral value of a work was designed to

⁴⁴ Thomas Hurka, *The Best Things in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 138.

⁴⁵ In his *Poetics* Aristotle presents an account of the mimetic art of tragedy, based on the notion of catharsis, that represents a good tragedy as having a beneficial ethical effect on its appreciative audience, as opposed to Plato's notorious critique of tragedy in his *Republic*, which attributes to every tragedy a harmful effect. I examine Aristotle's view and present my own account of the distinctive value of tragic works – a non-ethical account – in my *Values of Art*, 110–23.

capture only a certain aspect – admittedly one of vital aesthetic importance – of a work of art, namely the power of the work in itself, simply through undergoing the experience it offers, to effect the moral improvement of someone or some segment of society. In other words the focus was on a particular person's engagement with a work, understanding it and responding to it as its artistic value merits. So I had left aside all those cases in which people engage with a work but do not appreciate it as it merits (either undervaluing or overvaluing it); I had excluded all the surrounding circumstances and the various social pressures that are highly likely in the case of many members of the society to affect their interaction with the work, for better or worse; and I had prioritized a single appreciative engagement with the work, leaving aside any cumulative effect of repeated engagements with it or with other works that have a similar or related moral aspect. Furthermore, the emphasis was on grown-up people, mature adults, most of whom lack the malleability of children. It is now time to widen the focus.

XVIII

There is one highly significant way in which the arts of a society are likely to influence those brought up in it. This derives from the fact that the most important feature of the culture of any society or other social grouping, where its culture includes its aims, attitudes, beliefs, customs, practices, and values, is its values – the values it manifests, embraces, recommends, advocates, enforces – and the ways in which these values are embodied in the society. We all owe a large part of our identity to the various cultures – the culture of our family, friends, school, neighbourhood, society, country, era – in which we are brought up. We are shaped by them, for better or worse: vulnerable to their defects, small or grave, we are inevitably harmed by them, to a greater or lesser extent; and, open to their virtues, our lives are enhanced by the degree and extent to which we assimilate them. If we are lucky, what is good more than compensates for what is bad, and, so strengthened, we are endowed with the capacity to flourish and to contribute, in a small or large way, to the beneficial character of at least some of our surrounding cultures, or even future cultures; if we are unlucky, perhaps very unlucky, this is entirely denied us and, on the one hand, we are likely to wither and contribute nothing to the advancement of any culture, however narrow, or, on the other hand, if what is bad wins out over what is good, we might find ourselves in, or manoeuvre ourselves into, the right position to advance ourselves and impose our selfish will on those weaker or less fortunate than ourselves, on a small or large scale, effecting or contributing to an undesirable culture.

It is upon this obvious truth that Plato's best thoughts about art were founded. For art is a significant part of any (advanced) society; the art produced in, admired

by, or enforced on a society displays, manifests, expresses to a greater or lesser extent the values of the culture or cultures of the society; and as the art changes, so does the culture and its values. Plato's multi-layered concern with the kind of art that should be welcomed into or banished from his ideal Republic was based upon what he took to be the beneficial and harmful effects of the customs and practices of a society on its members (and so was based, ultimately, on his conception of what kind of person was required to fulfil particular roles in his favoured society). He argued that only art of a certain sort should be admitted into an ideal society, much of the most esteemed art not being of this kind, and, accordingly, should be banished from it. His conception of the ideal society was, of course, based on his understanding of the nature of the social world in which he lived, which was very different from our own. But the considerations he advances in support of his views are not restricted to the society he favoured.

In fact there is much to be rejected in Plato's critique, but not all. One of his most important insights, which can be abstracted from his notion of an ideal society, was the likely effect of repeated exposures from childhood onwards to elements of the culture in which people are brought up, whereby, either because these elements are taken for granted or because they are thought of as harmless pleasures, 'little by little and all unawares,' 'imperceptibly,' without being aware of what is happening to them, the qualities of these elements or the values they represent are assimilated, making themselves 'at home little by little, until [they overflow] ever so quietly into people's character and pursuits,' moulding their emotional nature, values and behaviour.⁴⁶ Two of Plato's examples of such qualities were, first, on the valuable side the gracefulness, on the harmful side the gracelessness, of the artefacts (the architecture, for example) in the society or the behaviour of its members, and, second, the character of the music performed in it (which might itself be graceful or graceless). And his idea was that these qualities, encountered in a person's culture, especially if they predominate, are liable to affect the character of the person by encouraging the formation or strengthening the presence of these very qualities in the person.

Plato's view does not rest on the convincingness of the examples he gives. In fact it is underpinned by a number of commonplaces. For children are apt to imitate what they see and hear, and to imbibe, first of all, the values of those who raise them, or, instead, to suffer some form of damage from them, which will affect

⁴⁶ Plato, *Republic* 401b–d, 424d–e. I have used the translations of the text by Myles Burnyeat in his masterly *Culture and Society in Plato's 'Republic'*, ed. Grethe B. Peterson, Tanner Lectures on Human Values 20 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999). Burnyeat's 'Art and Mimesis in Plato's *Republic*', *London Review of Books*, May 21, 1998, is a very readable summary of the main line of thought of his Tanner Lectures.

the values they come to embrace.⁴⁷ As they grow up these values are affected both by the other people they interact with and those aspects of their culture that they are exposed to. By associating with people of a certain kind they are likely to adopt some of their views (and even their view of life) and to react emotionally to people and situations in similar ways to those people that they associate with. Similarly, by living in an environment of artistic works and cultural performances of various kinds that are accepted in the society or favoured by their friends and acquaintances, the values and emotional reactions these embody or express are liable to infiltrate their personality and character, modifying them, if young, through being accepted uncritically, reinforcing them if previously acquired, and continuing as elements of their inner selves, perhaps for a lifetime.⁴⁸ And the moulding or transformation of people through their cultural environment encourages the continuation, development, or transformation of the culture itself: the impact of the environmental culture on a person rebounds upon that environment to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the width and depth of the culture's influence on the person and on the ability and opportunity of the individual to determine in one way or another the character of the surrounding culture.

The character-forming potential (for better or worse) of works of art in a society depends on a number of factors, the principal ones being the nature of the art forms present in the society, the character and quality of the works, the proportion of people with access to the works, how often they experience them and the circumstances in which they do so, and, finally, the ability of people to distinguish good from mediocre or poor art and to prefer the good. The moral or ethical potential for a society with no form of narrative art will, other things equal, be lower than that for one that has one or more narrative forms, and the potential for a society in which only a small proportion of people have regular access to works of art will be less than that of a society in which works are more widely available. A society with a largely uneducated population cannot expect its finest

⁴⁷ Charles Dickens rightly emphasized the positive impact on a child's moral education of fairy tales and other imaginative children's literature of the right kind, indicating various morally good things that 'have been first nourished in the child's heart by [the] powerful aid' of stories. [Charles Dickens], 'Frauds on the Fairies', *Household Words*, October 1, 1853, available online at *Dickens Journals Online*, <http://www.djo.org.uk/household-words/volume-viii/page-97.html>.

⁴⁸ Tolstoy, in a visit to Marseilles, estimated that 'every week in the *cafés chantants* at least one-fifth of the population received oral education as the Greeks and Romans used to do' from the performance of comedies and sketches and the declamation of verses, and he was of the opinion that 'for good or evil the influence of this unconscious education far outweighed that of the compulsory education given in schools'. Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy*, vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 221.



art to be widely appreciated. In recent years the effectiveness of art, especially narrative art, in playing an important role in determining the character of young people has, of course, been greatly magnified by the astonishing advance of numerous technologies, making works more easily available to a wider audience than ever before.

This influence of art on the morality and *ethos* of members of a society, especially younger members, that is, the assimilation or introjection of the values expressed by works of art, which has been present to a smaller or larger extent in every society, plays a significant role in modern societies. So do many non-art elements – advertisements, for example – which, case by case, and person by person, reinforce or counteract the influence of art. And nobody knows, for any society, what the overall effect of art, which is always changing, is – how powerful, long-standing, and wide-ranging, for good or bad, it may be. But whatever this overall effect may be, an acknowledgement of the character-forming effect of art highlighted by Plato does not imply that, even upon children, the best art has the best socially or morally desirable effects and the worst art the worst effects of these kinds: just as with the earlier notion of moral value, no necessary correlation between the degree of a work of art's specific value and the degree of its social or ethical value has been established. For all that has been proposed, it might be that the encounter with mediocre or poor art is just as effective as, if not more effective than, good art, at least in some cases and for some portion of the population. And the recognition of Plato's insight does not imply the imposition of censorship of socially undesirable works of art or the insistence that works of art must always promote moral or social values. For censorship has problems of its own, and assigning to the production of works of art the limiting aim of promoting moral or social values presupposes that art can have no other worthwhile function in human life. Nevertheless, works of art that embody or express undesirable values or deplorable emotional reactions should certainly be subjected to criticism on these grounds; members of a society, especially young and susceptible persons, should be discouraged from giving time to them; and works that embody or express desirable values and admirable emotional reactions should, to the degree that they are fine works of art, be celebrated and recommended.

XIX

Despite my acceptance of the significance of the kind of moral/social influence of art highlighted by Plato, which applies just as much to a beneficial as to a harmful influence, it might be thought that my assertion of the impossibility or the relative weakness of a positive moral impact of a work of art, considered in



itself – what I have called the moral value of the work – diminishes the place of art in human life: the love of art cannot be justified. But this would be a mistake.

The fact is that it is quite unnecessary for any works of art to possess moral value (especially in what I have identified as the most important sense) in order for art to play a crucial and irreplaceable role in human life. For the true end of art has an importance in human life that is not guaranteed by the observance of morality. Morality is not all-important in human life: it needs to be supplemented – a supplement that art is fit to provide, not uniquely but to a significant degree, and, moreover, one that it has provided in every society, culture, or civilization of which we have record. Here it is vital to realize that the ultimately desirable form of human life – the final end of humanity – is not the attainment of a morally perfect world, a world in which everyone is as morally perfect as possible – a world in which nobody has false moral views, and where there are no moral transgressions, each person always willingly doing whatever morality requires. What Kant called the Kingdom of Ends is in this sense not the Highest Good. I believe that this is easy to see, for such a world – a world, for a number of reasons, forever out of reach – might, despite the morally perfect behaviour of everyone (and the security against wrong-doing this would provide), be a world in which everyone is pretty wretched throughout their lives, struggling throughout each day to survive, a world in which each person's life is full of suffering and anxiety.⁴⁹ And even if such a life is regarded as worth living, it would not be a life well worth living. It would be an impoverished life. For morality is not the single ultimately valuable thing in human life, but only an essential condition of people not being treated wrongly, morally wrong treatment undermining or diminishing the chance of a person's living a life well worth living, or lessening the degree to which that life was worth living. The simple truth is that a good person may not have what is good for a person, that is to say, a good life: a morally good life is not thereby a good life, let alone the best possible life, for the person living that life: a morally good life is not thereby a life that lacks nothing of value, a life that cannot be improved – in fact it might lack many of the most wonderful things possible in a human life.⁵⁰ For a life to have been a very good life for the person living that life it must have had sizeable segments each of which was intrinsically valuable for the person – segments during which the person was more or less contented or happy – so that the person was (to a greater or lesser extent) glad to be living through them (for their own sake), even though the person might have preferred parts of his or her life to have been different and so to have lived a better life: it is

⁴⁹ Socrates was wrong to claim that the good person cannot be harmed.

⁵⁰ Aristotle was wrong to claim that the morally good life is thereby a good life – a life of well-being – for the person living that life.

these segments – the nature of them – that make the life well worth living. What would make life worth living in a morally perfect world, and what does make life worth living in our morally imperfect world, is the particular character of the experiences that a person undergoes and the activities in which she engages in her life. Insofar as these experiences and activities are of the right kind and they are not too infrequent, the person flourishes. The flourishing of every morally good person *is* an ultimately valuable thing, a supreme end, that should not be thwarted, undermined, harmed, hampered, or inhibited by immoral conduct. The final end of humanity, for those who recognize the requirements of morality – as so many do not and never will – is a morally perfect world in which as many of the inhabitants as possible flourish, living lives of personal satisfaction, developing whatever morally acceptable talents they may have been endowed with or otherwise acquired, and appreciating such talents of others.⁵¹

There are, of course, many ways in which one can flourish – there is no best way of filling one's life – and one might flourish only at certain periods of one's life rather than throughout. To the degree that you flourish, your life is enhanced. Prominent amongst the ways in which your life can be enhanced are – I mention just four – (i) the acquisition – the very (process of) acquisition and the concomitant enlarged possibilities of future life – of various kinds of understanding, or discovery or knowledge (both knowing how and knowing that), (ii) friendship and mutual love (between couples or between parents and their children, for example), (iii) many kinds of achievement – the achievement itself (and the later memory of it), not just whatever the fruits of the achievement might be, and (iv) awareness of the flourishing of the morally good. These are all things that in one way or another are rewarding, indeed valuable, to you, in themselves, not just in virtue of what they might issue in. And, of course, art is, by its very nature, one of the great enhancements of life, both to the creators of art (which includes not just artists but also singers, musicians, actors, directors, dancers, and so on) and also to those who merely reap the benefits of the existence of fine art through and in the very experience of it, the mere appreciators of art. But the lives of, on the one hand, artists and, on the other, lovers of art, are enhanced by art in very different ways. For (successful) artists there is above all their achievement in making fine art (achievement, as I have indicated, being something that is intrinsically rewarding and that makes the life of those who achieve their goal in that respect worth living). For those responsive to art but not active in its production, art is an enhancement of life even to those who are not flourishing. The fundamental reason why art matters to those who do not

⁵¹ Socrates was wrong to claim that the unexamined life – a life lacking reflection on how one has most reason to live – is not worth living.

create or participate in its creation or performance is that it provides experiences they greatly value that are unavailable outside art: it massively enlarges the possible scope of valuable human experience. As Wallace Stevens said of poetry, the arts are one of 'the enlargements of life', enlargements that enrich life.⁵² However, what art gives to those who appreciate it – the reason for which they value the experiences offered by art – varies from art to art, from artist to artist, and even from work to work of the same artist, the different natures of these gifts being a vitally important and yet radically under-explored topic that I cannot go into now.⁵³ But undoubtedly art is one of the major enhancements and enlargements of life, for without exception works of art provide us with experiences we would not have if art did not exist, and certain of these experiences are such as to enhance our lives – all our lives if we have the requisite capacities to appreciate them. My life might have been better – better for me – in many ways if it had turned out differently. And I can conceive of a life I might have led in which art would have played no part. But for any life I might have led, the introduction into it of the appreciation of those works I admire would, other things equal, and looking back on it from where I am now, have improved it – their absence would have been an impoverishment. In short: for those who love art, art enhances life. And the important role that art has played and will always play in human life is in one sense irreplaceable. Although there are many kinds of achievement and many kinds of experiences and activities other than the artistic that can make life worth living, and even if some of these have an equal or superior value to those of art in the good life of a morally good person, nothing provides what the arts do, nothing provides the same enhancement. However, not only are the arts special, but, as I have indicated, each of the arts is special, each offering a different enhancement of human life, and they cannot be replaced by anything else that offers just what they offer.⁵⁴ But then the various

⁵² Ortega y Gasset thought that the modern (non-realistic) poet 'augments the world, adding to the real, which is already there, an unreal aspect'. José Ortega y Gasset, 'The Dehumanization of Art', in *Velazquez, Goya, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays*, trans. Alexis Brown (London: Studio Vista, 1972), 75. But this is true of previous artists also: art augments the world for anyone who loves art. Although Rousseau wrote 'The real world has its limits; the imaginary world is infinite', what he advocated was living within the limits. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), bk. 2, 81.

⁵³ For Proust's account of why we finish a good novel feeling happy, even if the story is sad, see his 'The Power of the Novelist', in *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1988), 146.

⁵⁴ It should not be forgotten that we are indebted to artists not simply for the experiences provided by their works. There are other benefits, provided by artists of all kinds, articulated for the art of painting by Meyer Schapiro in this way: 'By maintaining his loyalty to the value of art – to responsible creative work, the search for perfection, the sensitiveness to quality – the artist is one of the most moral and idealistic of beings,

sports, for example, are also special, as are many other activities or pursuits, such as fishing or gardening or constructing or solving crossword puzzles. And given the diversity – the inevitable and welcome diversity – of human beings, a comparative ranking of the various kinds of enhancement of human life could at best only be relative to types of people.

In his extraordinary, early work *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche, reflecting on the value or lack of value of human life, and denying (correctly) that morality gave sense to existence, claimed that 'our highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*'.⁵⁵ But this is a wild view, the expression of a highly talented young man enraptured by art (especially tragedy and music) and sceptical of Christian morality.⁵⁶ His prime target was the Christian view that each morally good person, in the past, present, or future, will in the afterlife have an eternal life of supreme happiness, so that, despite the horrors and suffering of humanity throughout history, the world is and always has been eternally justified. Given that this is untrue – so that there is no adequate compensation for 'the terrible or absurd nature of existence'⁵⁷ – the world, viewed from the moral point of view, is not eternally justified. But the idea of the world – the human world – being eternally justified as an aesthetic phenomenon is unclear.⁵⁸ It would, of course, be trivial if it meant just that at any time there will always be something in human life that, if appreciated from the aesthetic point of view, will have a positive value: this would be equally true of the moral point of view. If it

although his influence on practical affairs may seem very small. Painting by its impressive example of inner freedom and inventiveness and by its fidelity to artistic goals, which include the mastery of the formless and accidental, helps to maintain the critical spirit and the ideals of creativeness, sincerity and self-reliance, which are indispensable to the life of our culture.' Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978), 226.

⁵⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), § 5, 32–33.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche later made this confession: 'At that time I believed that from the aesthetic point of view the world was a drama and meant as such by its author, but that as a moral phenomenon it was a *fraud*: therefore I came to the conclusion that the world could be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.' And this is clarified by his having thought at that time that the origin of such an awful world as our own 'must not be sought in a moral being, but perhaps in an artist-creator'. See Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Notebook 30, summer 1878', in *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas, trans. Ladislaus Löb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 238.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, § 7, 40.

⁵⁸ Whatever exactly 'justified' is supposed to mean, it must imply that, other things equal, it is better, from some point of view, for the world (humanity) to have existed rather than not.

were to mean that at any time the existence of the world and its present character would be justified from the aesthetic point of view, since from that point of view it will have a positive overall aesthetic value, it would be vulnerable to a twofold objection: first, there is no reason to believe that at any time the world – given the appalling happenings intrinsic to human life, the incidence of so many chance occurrences in anyone's life, and the lack of any artistic shape actually imposed upon it – when properly looked at will be seen to have an overall positive aesthetic value,⁵⁹ and, second, even if at some time the world, in virtue of its character at that time, should, when looked at as an aesthetic phenomenon, be seen as having a positive aesthetic value, the aesthetic value of a changing item will itself change from time to time, and who is to say that it cannot become aesthetically unattractive? And if it meant only that, looking back from eternity, as it were, the world – which has an unconstructed narrative of infinite complexity, with, let us admit, some aesthetically valuable aspects – will rightly be seen to be, overall, aesthetically attractive, then where's the argument? In fact, Nietzsche later changed the force of his view, weakening it to 'as an *aesthetic phenomenon* existence is still *bearable* to us'.⁶⁰ This is an assertion about a moment (or number of moments) in time, and it may well have been true for him. But it is vital to realize that this new thought of Nietzsche's has not just a weaker force, but also a much narrower focus. For what he is recommending is the adoption (from time to time) of both an aesthetic (spectatorial) and, especially, an artistic (creative) attitude, rather than (just) a moral attitude, *towards oneself*, so that it is me (or you) that is being regarded as an aesthetic phenomenon, not the world (in which there is so much cruelty and suffering). His idea is that it is desirable that we should be able to stand above morality, and look at and work upon ourselves from the aesthetic point of view, with the result that, whatever we have done or whatever has happened to us, we can, from this point of view, see ourselves with satisfaction.⁶¹ Accordingly, this has nothing to do with the world and existence being eternally justified (or bearable);⁶² and in any case, although you can adopt this attitude towards yourself sometimes, or some of the time, there is no guarantee that,

⁵⁹ Here is a possible point of view: 'Life is worse than the poorest novel: devoid of narrative, peopled by bores and rogues, short on wit, long on unpleasant incidents, and leading to a painfully predictable dénouement.' Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Pan Books, 1985), 171.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), § 106, 104.

⁶¹ See also *ibid.*, §§ 290 and 299.

⁶² As far as the world is concerned, Nietzsche's view at that time was that 'The total character of the world [...] is for all eternity chaos – not in the sense of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called'. *Ibid.*, § 109, 109.



whatever befalls you, you can do this at will, or that when you do adopt this attitude you will find yourself, or be successful in making yourself, aesthetically attractive. The fact is that (in Nietzsche's hyperbolic language) existence and the world would be eternally (and fully) justified only – and perhaps not even then – if the morally admirable led lives in which they flourished. Given the virtual impossibility of achieving a morally perfect world – and so the unattainability of the final end of humanity – and given that in a morally imperfect world the lives of at least a proportion of the morally good will be harmed, often severely, by the actions of the morally bad, the aim of humanity must be to bring about a world in which as many as possible of the population are morally admirable, with as many as possible of these leading lives in which they flourish, the creation and appreciation of art being just one of the ways in which people's lives can be enhanced, although a particularly important one in modern advanced societies.

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