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—Mortimer Adler



MORTIMER ADLER ON THE GREAT IDEA OF ART

THE ANCIENTS, trying to understand the natural phenomena of change and generation, found that the processes of artistic production provided them with an analytic model. Through understanding how he himself worked in making things, man might come to know how nature worked.

When a man makes a house or a statue, he transforms matter. Changes in shape and position occur. The plan or idea in the artist's mind comes, through his manipulation of matter, to be embodied and realized objectively. To the ancients a number of different causes or factors seemed to be involved in every artistic production—material to be worked on; the activity of the artist at work; the form in his mind which he sought to impose on the matter, thus transforming it; and the purpose which motivated his effort.

In the medical tradition from Aristotle through Galen to Harvey, there is constant emphasis upon the artistic activity of nature. Galen continually argues against those who do not conceive Nature as an artist. Harvey consciously compares the activity of nature in biological generation to that of an artist. "Like a potter she first divides her material, and then indicates the head and trunk and extremities; like a painter, she first sketches the parts in outline, and then fills them in with colours; or like the ship-builder, who first lays down his keel by way of foundation, and upon this raises the ribs and roof or deck: even as he builds his vessel does nature fashion the trunk of the body and add the extremities."

Of all natural changes, the one most closely resembling artistic production appears to be generation, especially the production of living things by living things. In both cases, a new individual seems to come into being. But upon further examination, artistic production and natural generation reveal significant differences—differences which divide nature from art.

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Aquinas considers both and distinguishes them in his analysis of divine causation. In things not generated by chance, he points out that there are two different ways in which the form that is in the agent is passed on to another being. "In some agents the form of the thing to be made pre-exists according to its natural being, as in

those that act by their nature; as a man generates a man, or fire generates fire. Whereas in other agents the form of the thing to be made pre-exists according to intelligible being, as in those that act by the intellect; and thus the likeness of a house pre-exists in the mind of the builder. And this may be called the idea of the house, since the builder intends to build his house like to the form conceived in his mind.”

Thus in biological procreation the progeny have the form of their parents—a rabbit producing a rabbit, a horse, a horse. But in artistic production, the product has, not the form of the artist, but the form he has conceived in his mind and which he seeks to objectify.

Furthermore, in generation, and in other natural changes as well, the matter which undergoes change seems to have in itself a tendency to become what it changes into, as for example the acorn naturally tends to become an oak, whereas the oaken wood does not have in itself any tendency to become a chair or a bed. The material the artist works on is entirely passive with respect to the change he wishes to produce. The artistic result is in this sense entirely of his making.

The realm of art, or of the artificial, is then opposed to the natural and differentiated from it. Kant, for whom art is distinguished from nature “as making is from acting or operating in general,” claims that “by right, it is only production through freedom, i.e., through an act of will that places reason at the basis of its action, that should be termed art.” Consequently, art is that which would not have come into being without human intervention.

The man-made object is produced by man, not in *any* way, but specifically by his intelligence, by the reason which makes him free.

Animals other than man are apparently productive, but the question is whether they can be called “artists.” “A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells.

But,” according to Marx, “what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.

“At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He

not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which must subordinate his will.”

Some writers, like Montaigne, attribute the productivity of animals to reason rather than instinct. Art then ceases to be one of man’s distinctions from the brutes.

But if man alone has reason, and if the productions of art are works of reason, then those who refer to animals as artists speak metaphorically, on the basis of what Kant calls “an analogy with art As soon as we call to mind,” he continues, “that no rational deliberation forms the basis of the labor, we see at once that it is a product of their nature (of instinct), and it is only to the Creator that we ascribe it as art.”

This in turn leads to the question whether nature itself is a work of art. “Let me suppose,” the Eleatic Stranger says in the *Sophist*, “that things which are said to be made by nature are the work of divine art, and that things which are made by man out of these are the work of human art. And so there are two kinds of making and production, the one human and the other divine.”

If we suppose that the things of nature are originally made by a divine mind, how does their production differ from the work of human artists, or from biological generation? One answer, given in Plato’s *Timaeus*, conceives the original production of things as a fashioning of primordial matter in the patterns set by the eternal archetypes or ideas. In consequence, the divine work would be more like human artistry than either would be like natural reproduction. The emanation of the world from the One, according to Plotinus, and the production of things out of the substance of God in Spinoza’s theory, appear, on the other hand, to be more closely analogous to natural generation than to art.

Both analogies—of creation with art and with generation—are dismissed as false by Christian theologians. God’s making is *absolutely* creative. It presupposes no matter to be formed; nor do things issue forth from God’s own substance, but out of nothing.

Thus Augustine asks: “How didst Thou *make the heaven and the earth*?” And he answers: “It was not as a human artificer, forming one body from another, according to the discretion of his mind, which can in some way invest with such a form, as it seeth in itself by its inward eye Verily, neither in the heaven, nor in the earth,

didst Thou *make heaven and earth*; nor in the air, or waters, seeing these also belong to the heaven and the earth; nor in the whole world didst Thou make the whole world; because there was no place where to make it, before it was made, that it might be . . . For what is, but because Thou art? Therefore *Thou spakest, and they were made, and in Thy Word Thou madest them.*” According to this view, human art cannot be called creative, and God cannot be called an artist, except metaphorically.

But here we must observe that, according to the view we take of the similitude between human and divine workmanship, the line we are able to draw between the realms of art and nature becomes shadowy or sharp.

THE DISCUSSIONS OF ART in the great books afford materials from which a systematic classification of the arts might be constructed, but only fragments of such a classification are ever explicitly presented.

For example, the seven liberal arts are enumerated by various authors, but their distinction from other arts, and their ordered relation to one another, do not receive full explication. There is no treatment of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (or dialectic) to parallel Plato’s consideration of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy in the *Republic*; nor is there any analysis of the relation of the first three arts to the other four—traditionally organized as the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. However, in Augustine’s work *On Christian Doctrine* we have a discussion of these arts as they are ordered to the study of theology. That orientation of the liberal arts is also the theme of Bonaventura’s *Reduction of the Arts to Theology*.

The principles of classification of the fine arts are laid down by Kant from “the analogy which art bears to the mode of expression of which men avail themselves in speech, with a view to communicating themselves to one another as completely as possible.” Since such expression “consists in word, gesture, and tone,” he finds three corresponding fine arts: “the art of speech, formative art, and the art of the play of sensations.” In these terms he analyzes rhetoric and poetry, sculpture, architecture, painting and landscape gardening, and music.

A different principle of division is indicated in the opening chapters of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The principle that all art imitates nature suggests the possibility of distinguishing and relating the various

arts according to their characteristic differences as *imitations*—by reference to the *object* imitated and to the *medium* and *manner* in which it is imitated by the poet, sculptor or painter, and musician.

“Color and form,” Aristotle writes, “are used as means by some ... who imitate and portray many things by their aid, and the voice is used by others ... Rhythm alone, without harmony, is the means in the dancer’s imitations ... There is, further, an art which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose or in verse.” Aristotle’s treatise deals mainly with this art—poetry; it does not develop for the other fine arts the analysis it suggests.

Aristotle’s principle also suggests questions about the useful arts. Are such arts as shoemaking and house-building imitations of nature in the same sense as poetry and music? Does the way in which the farmer, the physician, and the teacher imitate nature distinguish these three arts from the way in which a statue is an imitation, or poem, or a house?

The Aristotelian dictum about art imitating nature has, of course, been as frequently challenged as approved. Apart from the issue of its truth, the theory of art as imitation poses many questions which Aristotle left unanswered. If there are answers in the great books, they are there by implication rather than by statement.

THE MOST FAMILIAR distinction between arts—that between the useful and the fine—is also the one most frequently made in modern discussion. The criterion of the distinction needs little explanation. Some of man’s productions are intended to be used; others to be contemplated or enjoyed. To describe them in terms of imitation, the products of the useful arts must be said to imitate a natural function (the shoe, for example, the protective function of caloused skin). The imitation merely indicates the use, and it is the use which counts. But in the products of the fine arts, the imitation of the form, quality, or other aspect of a natural object is considered to be the source of pleasure.

The least familiar distinction among the arts is implied in any thorough discussion, yet its divisions are seldom, if ever, named. Within the sphere of useful art, some arts work toward a result which can hardly be regarded as an artificial product. Fruits and grains would grow without the intervention of the farmer, yet the farmer helps them to grow more abundantly and regularly. Health and knowledge are natural effects, even though the arts of medicine and teaching may aid in their production,

These arts, stand in sharp contrast to those skills whereby man produces the useful things which, but for man's work, would be totally lacking. In the one case, it is the artist's activity itself which imitates or cooperates with nature's manner of working; in the other, the things which the artist makes by operating on passive materials supplied by nature imitate natural forms or functions.

For the most part, the industrial arts are of the second sort. They transform dead matter into commodities or tools. The arts which cooperate with nature usually work with living matter, as in agriculture, medicine, and teaching. The distinction seems warranted and clear. Yet it is cut across by Adam Smith's division of labor into productive and non-productive. The work of agriculture is associated with industry in the production of wealth, but what ever other use they may have, physicians and teachers, according to Smith, do not directly augment the wealth of nations.

If to the foregoing we add the division of the arts into *liberal* and *servile*, the major traditional distinctions are covered. This last division had its origin in the recognition that some arts, like sculpture and carpentry, could not effect their products except by shaping matter, whereas some arts, like poetry or logic were *free from matter*, at least in the sense than they worked productively in symbolic mediums.

But by other principles of classification, poetry and sculpture are separated from logic and carpentry, as fine from useful art. Logic along with grammar, rhetoric, and the mathematical arts, is separated from poetry and sculpture, as liberal from fine art. When the word "liberal" is used to state this last distinction, its meaning narrows. It signifies only the speculative arts, or arts concerned with processes of thinking and knowing.

The adequacy of any classification, and the intelligibility of its principles, must stand the test of questions about particular arts. The great books frequently discuss the arts of animal husbandry and navigation, the arts of cooking and hunting, the arts of war and government. Each raises a question about the nature of art in general, and challenges any analysis of the arts to classify them and explain their peculiarities.

THERE ARE TWO OTHER major issues which have been debated mainly with respect to the fine arts.

One, already mentioned, concerns the imitative character of art. The opponents of imitation do not deny that there may be some perceptible resemblance between a work of art and a natural object. A drama may remind us of human actions we have experienced; music may simulate the tonal qualities and rhythms of the human voice registering the course of the emotions. Nevertheless, the motivation of artistic creation lies deeper, it is said, than a desire to imitate nature, or to find some pleasure in such resemblances.

According to Tolstoy, the arts serve primarily as a medium of spiritual communication, helping to create the ties of human brotherhood. According to Freud, it is emotion or subconscious expression, rather than imitation or communication, which is the deepest spring of art; the poet or artist “forces us to become aware of our inner selves in which the same impulses are still extant even though they suppressed.” Freud’s theory of sublimation of emotion or desire through art seems to connect with Aristotle’s theory of emotional catharsis or purgation. But Freud is attempting to account for the origin of art, and Aristotle is trying to describe an effect proper to its enjoyment.


The theories of communication, expression, or imitation, attempt to explain art, or at least its motivation. But there is also a conception of art which, foregoing explanation, leaves it a mystery—the spontaneous product of inspiration, of a divine madness, the work of unfathomable genius. We encounter this notion first, but not last, in Plato’s *Ion*.

THE OTHER MAJOR controversy concerns the regulation of the arts by the state for human welfare and the public good.

Here, as before, the fine arts (chiefly poetry and music) have been the focus of the debate. It is worth noting, however, that a parallel problem of political regulation occurs in the sphere of the industrial arts. On the question of state control over the production and distribution of wealth, Smith and Marx represent extreme opposites, as Milton and Plato are poles apart on the question of the state’s right to censor the artist’s work. In this debate, Aristotle stands on Plato’s side in many particulars, and Mill with Milton.

The problem of censorship or political regulation of the fine arts presupposes some prior questions. Plato argues in the *Republic* that all poetry but “hymns to the gods and praises of famous men” must be banned from the State; “for if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law

and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed the best, but *pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State.*” Such a view presupposes a certain theory of the fine arts and of their influence on the citizens and the whole character of the community. Yet because both Plato and Aristotle judge that influence to be far from negligible, they do not see any reason in individual liberty for the state to refrain from interfering with the rights of the artist for the greater good of the community.

To Milton and Mill, the measure of the artist’s influence does not affect the question of the freedom of the arts from political or ecclesiastical interference. While admitting the need for protecting the interests of peace and public safety, Milton demands: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” The issue for them is entirely one of liberty. They espouse the cause of freedom—for the artist to express or communicate his work and for the community to receive from him whatever he has to offer. 

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