



HOW TO THINK ABOUT ART

MORTIMER ADLER

Today we begin the discussion of Art. And we begin with the most general consideration of *what art* is and what its significance or role is in human life.

Now there is something I've been meaning to say for some weeks now, something that I think many of you have recognized yourself: the fact that in the discussion of ideas, words often get in the way. This is particularly true of The Great Ideas. Words make great difficulties for them. And among The Great Ideas it is especially true of Art. The word "art" itself causes us some difficulty in understanding what art is. And unless we face this difficulty about words in this series of discussions about art, we will not, I think, reach a truly philosophical understanding of art and the arts.

The evidence of what I've just been saying is, I think, quite plain in the letters we have received this week. In these letters there are many questions about art but they are all about art as if art were

fine art only, and even more narrowly than that, as if art consisted mainly of painting or of sculpture.

This meaning for the word “art” is a very recent meaning. It has appeared only in the last hundred years or even less than that. It is quite different from the meaning for the word “art” that existed—the way that the word “art” was used—throughout many centuries before our own time. We must face, then, a deep and serious conflict in the use of the word “art,” a contemporary use of it and an ancient and traditional use of it.

THE TRADITIONAL MEANING OF “ART”

And I think I should warn you as we start that I take sides in this battle between the ages, between the centuries; I favor the ancient and traditional meaning of art because I think it is broader, is more capacious, takes more in, and enables us to understand more.

Nevertheless, among the questions we received this week there were some, Lloyd, which do lead into a general consideration of art and which will enable us if we take them at the very beginning to help us to clarify the meaning of this basic and important word. I’m thinking particularly of the questions from Mrs. Springer and Mrs. Bertrand. Would you read those please?

Lloyd Luckman: I have them right here. Mrs. Springer is a resident of Sacramento and she asked the following question: She says, “From the beginning of civilization man’s progress has been measured by the development of what are called the arts and sciences.” That familiar phrase “arts and sciences” makes Mrs. Springer want to know how you distinguish between art and science.

Mortimer Adler: Mrs. Springer, I think that the distinction itself is as easy as the phrase is familiar. In fact there is another familiar phrase that all Americans are acquainted with that enables me to explain the distinction; the phrase is “know-how.” We speak of people having “know-how.” And when we say that a man or woman has “know-how,” we mean that he or she has a certain skill or expertness or technique in making something or producing something. Art, then, in the most generic sense of the word is *technique*. In fact that word technique in English comes from the Greek word *techne*, which in Greek means “art.” In contrast, science is not “know-how” but consists in knowing *that* something is the case or knowing *what is* the case or even in some cases knowing *why* it is.

Now the other question, Lloyd, from Mrs. Bertrand.

Lloyd Luckman: Yes, she's a San Franciscan and she has been reading a book on our subject, a book by Jacques Maritain.

Mortimer Adler: By the way, Lloyd, an excellent book. One of the best books on the subject, *Art and Scholasticism*.

Lloyd Luckman: That's the one. And she says that Maritain asked the following question: How does prudence, at once an intellectual virtue and a moral virtue, differ from art, which is a merely intellectual virtue? Now she would like to know how you answer this question posed by Maritain.

Mortimer Adler: My answer, Mrs. Bertrand, is going to be exactly the same answer that Maritain gives us, the only answer I know. But first, let me say that you must understand how Maritain is using the word "virtue."

In America today, in the modern world in general, we tend to use the word "virtue" to name the moral virtues, things like temperance or courage or even prudence. But Maritain is using the word "virtue" in a broader sense, for good intellectual habits as well as good moral habits. Thus for Maritain, art and science and wisdom and understanding are virtues as much as temperance and justice and courage.

Now then, in terms of this understanding of virtue, let me say that these two intellectual virtues, prudence and art, both of them, consist in "know-how" but the difference between them is that prudence consists in knowing how to *act* well, knowing how to *do* something well, whereas art consists in knowing how to *produce* or *make* something in a good manner, to produce something that is good.

Perhaps, Lloyd, I can summarize the two distinctions that these questions call for under three headings: art, science, and prudence. Science and art and prudence, all three of them involve knowledge or knowing. But whereas science consists in knowing that something is the case or *what* something is or *why* it is, both art and prudence consist in knowing *how*. And whereas art consists in knowing how to *make* something well, prudence consists in knowing how to *act* well, how to behave well morally or socially.

Now let me come back to the generic meaning of art that I think

we should face, which is the ancient meaning that I referred to at the very beginning. The generic meaning of art is skill in production, skill in making something, so that anything in which a human being has had a hand and has expressed his skill in the production of it, that thing is a work of art.

Now as I look around this room or as you look around the room in which you are sitting, I seem to be surrounded by nothing but works of art. This paperweight is a work of art, this telephone is a work of art, this cigarette box is a work of art, this pencil is a work of art, these cigarettes, that clock, the desk itself is a work of art. In fact everything I see except you, Lloyd, is a work of art. And I include myself as well, but I think, perhaps, we ought not to get personal about ourselves in this respect so I'd like to show you a picture of something which is not a work of art. I have to go outside this room, outside of your room. Here is something which is not a work of art, a tree in a primeval forest, which came into being and grew without any human effort, an extraordinarily big and glorious tree.

And you remember, of course, those trite but quite true lines of the poet Joyce Kilmer, which says this very thing, "Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree."

Now then, consider another thing which is not a work of art. I hope you all agree with me that a human baby is not a work of art. But as soon as you agree with me-if you do agree with me-that a human baby is not a work of art, we get into difficulties at once, because I said that the tree was not a work of art because it came into the forest and grew there without any human effort. I can't say of the baby that no human effort is involved in its production, but I can say, and I shall have to explain this later, that the kind of human effort that is involved in its production doesn't make it a work of art.

THE RESTRICTED CONTEMPORARY SENSE OF "ART"

If I followed the contemporary sense of what art is and what works of art are, I would not have the difficulty I have just had. According to the contemporary sense of works of art, there is nothing on my desk or in this room which is strictly a work of art. Again, I must leave the room, I must go now to a museum, for the contemporary sense of works of art consists of thinking of things, referring to things, which hang on the walls of museums or stand on pedestals there. If I show to you a statue, one of the great statues by Michelangelo, *The Pieta*, a very famous work of art which

stands at the entrance to St. Peter's in Rome, if I show this to you, you and all other contemporary persons would say, "Yes, that's a work of art." But if passing from this we were to look at a great tennis player playing tennis, you would not-most people today would not-think this was an artistic performance; they would regard it as an athletic exhibition, an exhibition of athletic prowess, not a performance that reflected art, no matter how great the skill that it involved in the performance that this tennis player was doing.

Now this contemporary sense of art is, I think, summarized in phrases that we all use in which the word "art" seems to be most natural to us as we speak. We speak of museums of art, we speak of art institutes, we speak of an art student. And when we say "art student," we usually mean a person studying painting, or sculpture, or some other kind of plastic art. We even say, I think, and I really think the phrase is quite abominable, "literature, music, and the fine arts," as if literature were not a fine art, as if music were not a fine art. But even if that narrow meaning were mixed with the fine arts, or the meaning of plastic art were broadened so that the fine arts were understood by us to include music and literature as well, I would think that that meaning is still too narrow for a deep and proper understanding of what art is and the role it plays in human life.

THE BROADER MEANING OF ART IS STILL CURRENT

Now let me ask you: Is this your meaning of art? This narrow, restricted meaning? You may think it is but I would like to show you that it isn't. I would like to show you that in your own vocabulary, in your daily speech, you have traces of the ancient and traditional meaning. For example, all of you talk about the industrial arts. You talk about the arts of war. You talk about the art of teaching and the art of medicine. Everyone uses the phrase "the arts and crafts." And everyone understands, I think, that in the meaning of that basic word "artisan" there is as much the meaning of art as in the higher word "artist." Now this meaning-which you have in your own vocabulary as these phrases that are familiar to you, I think, reveal-this meaning is the meaning that the word has had, the notion that it expressed, throughout Western cultural history.

One finds this, by the way, plainest of all in the writings of the two great Greek philosophers: Plato and Aristotle. The works of Plato are full of references to art, perhaps more frequently than his references to philosophy or science. And not only does he refer to art

and talk about the various arts but he very frequently gives everyday examples of what he means by the arts and artists.

Plato, very frequently and with great pleasure, talks about a basic art, the art of the cook. The cook is an artist, in the deep Platonic sense of what human art is. Plato, even more frequently, talks about the art of the pilot. Plato, of course, thinking of the pilot as a navigator of a vessel on water. But for us today in modern dress, as it were, there are pilots in the air instead of on the sea, but nevertheless basically the same art that Plato is talking about.

And another familiar art in Plato's day is still a familiar art in our day and carries this basic meaning of the notion, "art." A physician, such as a surgeon performing an operation, is also practicing a basic human art.

Now when one understands this meaning, one is entitled to ask: Is it just a Platonic meaning? Or did this occur only among the Greeks? Did only Plato and Aristotle have this broad meaning of art to cover everything from cookery to painting and poetry? The answer is no. This meaning, this basic, broadened, widened, capacious meaning of art persisted through almost the whole of Western European civilization until yesterday. It ran through Roman antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance and came down to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Let me show you this by reading two passages from the Great Books: one from Rousseau at the middle of the eighteenth century and one from Adam Smith toward the close of the eighteenth century. These passages indicate that as recently as a century or a half-century ago this basic, broad meaning of art, was still the common meaning in everyday speech. Rousseau, like Lucretius, the Roman poet, looked upon the rise of civilization itself as something that depended upon basic human arts. Lucretius had referred to the rise of civilization as a result of the fashioning of metal tools and the domestication of animals and the cultivation of the soil. And here, centuries later, many centuries later, Rousseau says, "Metallurgy and agriculture were the two arts which produced this great revolution."

Then in 1776, just as the Industrial Revolution was beginning—and in 1776, it had barely begun—in 1776, most production still went on in homes or in small shops with hand tools and by handwork. We didn't have industrial production by large machines and assembly lines. "At this moment," Adam Smith says, talking about the division of labor in the production of a coat, (listen to the

words), “the shepherd, the sorter of the wool, the wool comber or carder, the dyer, the scribbler, the spinner, the weaver, the fuller, the dresser, with many others, must all join their different arts.” Hear the word? “. . . must all join their different arts in order to complete even this homely production, a woolen coat.”

Lloyd Luckman: You know, as I listen to you, particularly reading that quotation from Adam Smith, I’m rather puzzled, particularly by this one thing: the enumeration in Adam Smith seems to me to fit the definition of art as “simply a skill in making,” because in all of the instances and that particular instance of making a coat, an artificial product is produced.

And then there is another question that arises, too. If *making is* involved in art, I’m concerned about your illustrations of the pilot or of the doctor or of the teacher or the farmer. I don’t see what they make.

THE NATURAL AND THE ARTIFICIAL

Mortimer Adler: Well, Lloyd, in the sense in which the cobbler makes a shoe or the cook a pastry or the various arts mentioned by Adam Smith make a woolen coat, in that sense these other artists you mentioned—the farmer, the pilot, the physician—they don’t produce anything that you would call an artificial product. On the contrary, the things they help come into being, help generate themselves—like health in the case of the physician or knowledge in the case of the teacher or the fruits and grains of the field in the case of the farmer—these are the products of nature. And they are natural effects, not artistic effects. And I’m going to try to explain therefore—I can’t today, Lloyd, but I’m going to try to explain next time—these very special and queer arts which are different from the other arts in that what the artist in this case helps to produce turns out to be a natural product not an artificial thing.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, now-

Mortimer Adler: One moment more.

Lloyd Luckman: All right.

Mortimer Adler: Because there is one thing that is clear from this, and that is that if you look at these arts like healing and teaching and farming as compared with shoemaking and cooking, the meaning of art must not be found in the products: art is not connected necessarily with an artificial product, the meaning of art lies in the

skill. And we do know that the physician has skill and the farmer has skill, even if the product is something natural, not artificial.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, now I can come in with my concern about this distinction between artificial and natural. And I'm particularly concerned because I remember a question here about the distinction between these two words. It is the one that Mrs. Stephenson sent in from San Francisco. And she asked right on the point whether the distinction between the artificial and the natural throws any light on the meaning of art.

Mortimer Adler: It does indeed. Mrs. Stephenson, that distinction between the artificial and the natural goes right to the heart of the matter. Now let me see if I can state it for you. We call things natural which can come into being without any human effort. And when we call something artificial we call it that because some human effort is necessarily involved in its coming into being, its production.

That unfortunately brings us back to the baby again. Because everyone has a right to say, "But human effort is involved in the production of the baby. Why, then, don't you say the baby is artificial instead of natural?" And that is the question I've got to answer.

Let me see if I can answer it . . . I can't answer it directly; I've got to answer it in terms of a threefold distinction that I think will explain the differences between works of art, natural productions, and the divine creation.

THREE WAYS OF COMING INTO BEING

There are three ways of coming into being: by natural generation, by artistic production, and by divine creation. A baby is born by natural generation. In fact, what do we say about the baby, about the production of the baby? We don't say it is produced; we say it is reproduced. We don't say it is created; we say it is procreated. Now that is terribly important, the fact that we used "reproduced and procreated" there. Natural generation, which consists in the reproduction by a body of another body out of itself or its life. Notice that: a body out of a body or something like itself—either its own body or something like itself.

As compared with natural generation, artistic production and divine creation both are alike in that the production is by mind, not by body, and by idea. The artist must have the idea, in advance, of the thing he is going to produce. No parent has in advance the pre-

cise idea of the baby that is going to be reproduced. But whereas the artistic production of man is by mind and idea out of natural materials—materials afforded him by nature—the divine creation, on any theory of creation, is by the divine mind and idea, as we say in theology, “out of absolutely nothing.”

Let me come back to one of the points. The difference between a human reproduction—a baby—and a work of art is that the baby may resemble the parents or may not resemble the parents. And if the baby resembles the parents as opposed to the grandparents, they may resemble the parents in body rather than in mind. But any work of art, whether it be the simplest thing that is fashioned by man or a great painting or a great poem, resembles the soul or spirit of the maker. This shows you that art involves a human spirit, a human intelligence, a human mind, ideas, as reproduction in the case of the baby does not.

Now this leads to two concluding points I would like to make. The first is the distinction between making by instinct and making by art. Making by instinct is without conscious plan; making by art is with conscious plan by the application of rules and by the making of deliberate choices. This is the distinction, and a very important distinction, between human and animal making.

Let me read you one passage from Karl Marx on this distinction between human and animal making. Karl Marx says, “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 what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.”


This leads to my second concluding distinction, between making by rule and by choice as opposed to making by chance. If a piece of music happened to result from a cat walking on the keys of a piano, it would not be a work of art; but if a human composer sits down to imitate what a cat would sound like if a cat were to walk on the keys of a piano and produces something, a jazz piece of music like “Kitten on the Keys,” that is a work of art. And this is terribly important because the very essence of human art is the avoidance or elimination of chance in human affairs. To do something by rule, by preliminary and preparatory design, is what human art does for man as opposed to trusting to chance and accident.

The ancient Greek and Roman doctors made a sharp distinction

between the physician who was an artist and what they call the empiric. The empiric tried to cure diseases by trial and error, whereas the physician who had art, art in the deep sense, proceeded by knowledge and by rule and trusted as little to chance as possible.

And one other way of understanding this is Aristotle's very deep insight that only the person who has an art can make a mistake in that art. Only a person who knows the art of grammar can intentionally make mistakes in speech; the person who makes unintentional mistakes in speech has no art in this particular respect.

I'd like to summarize and say that art is the principle of all human work, of all skilled labor. And I mean very deeply that all human labor is skilled, even the least skilled labor has skill in it.

The points we've considered today, I know, are not entirely clear, but I hope as we go on with this discussion they will become clearer, particularly next week as we discuss the different kinds of art: the distinction between the fine and the useful arts, the distinction between the liberal or free and the servile arts, and, above all, the distinction between the simply productive arts like shoemaking or cooking and the extraordinary cooperative arts like farming and healing and teaching. 

Excerpted from the transcription from his television series *The Great Ideas* and the book, *How to Think About The Great Ideas*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

President Obama's children were attending the Chicago Lab School and now the Sidwell Friends School in D.C., both well known for their philosophy of Progressive Education and he has appointed Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education, who is also a product of philosopher John Dewey's Chicago Lab School.

What were Dr. Adler's views on Progressive Education?

Mel Friedman

Dear Mel,

An excellent and timely question that I will respond to with next week's journal.

Max

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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