



THE GOODNESS OF ART

MORTIMER ADLER

In this concluding session on the Great Idea of Art we shall deal with some moral and political problems in connection with the fine arts.

But first I want to return to a number of points which we did not fully complete in our discussion last week. We saw that each of the fine arts is like a language. It is a medium of expression, and because of that fact the form and the content of the work produced in that medium are not separable. This results in the untranslatability of what is being said in one fine art into another.

What a painting says cannot be translated into music. What a piece of music says cannot be translated into poetry. The arts can-not be reduced to a common denominator. And yet, there is a tendency on the part of the general public to try to reduce everything the arts say into the common ordinary medium of everyday speech. This has very two serious results.

First, it causes a misunderstanding of the arts, especially a misunderstanding of the nonliterary arts, as when people read the program notes to a symphony instead of listening to the music or when people allow the title of a painting to stir their imagination instead of actually seeing the plastic representation, the plastic form of the painting itself. The second result is the modernist revolt in all the arts: abstract painting, modern music, and a similar revolt in poetry.

Let me read you an example of the modernist revolt in poetry, a poem by e.e. cummings. I'm not going to read you the whole poem but only part of it. The title of the poem is "what if a much of a which of a wind." I'm going to read you the last stanza. "what if a dawn of a doom of a dream bites the universe in two, peels forever out of his grave and sprinkles nowhere with me and you? blows soon to never and never to twice (blow life to isn't: blow death to was)—all nothing's only our hugest home; the must who die, the more we live." That is an example of modern poetry in which music, the sound of the words rather than the sense, is being emphasized because the poet is protesting against the attempt to reduce everything to the ordinary common-day meanings of everyday speech.

The modernist revolt in all the arts performs a very important pedagogical function. It should teach us to see the works of art, each work of art, each kind of art, in its own terms. In painting, for example, it should teach us to see that every good painting is both representative and abstract, neither one nor the other. Great paintings are neither purely representative, purely imitative, nor purely abstract. They are not simply like newsreel or newspaper photographs of a scene, mere reporting. And neither are they mere designs of form and color with no reference to objects.

Last week Mr. Carvel asked about the role that imitation plays in the creation of a work of fine art. And I said that I thought that imitation and creation supplement each other. I said, in fact, that they fuse; that artistic making is both creative imitation and imitative creation. And the reason for this is that what the artist draws from the object must be subjectively transformed by him. And what he takes from his own soul or mind must be objectified by him.

This is why I would answer another question we have received, one we received from Mr. Thornton of San Bruno, in a similar fashion. Mr. Thornton holds, for example, the view which many of you may share, that works of fine art divide into the imitative and

into the abstract. “Imitative art,” he says, “represents nature.” “Abstract art comes entirely or mostly from the artist’s mind. All or most of the fine arts,” he goes on to say, “contain examples of both.”

Lloyd Luckman: Well, then what is—

Mortimer Adler: Just a moment, Lloyd, I hold an opposite view to this. For me, as I look at most works of fine art, certainly all the good ones, are both representative and abstract. They involve both imitation and creation.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, I can’t quite understand this controversy then, Dr. Adler, because if I understand you, you seem to be saying truly that there is no conflict between abstract and representative art. But I’m quite certain on the other hand that there is quite a controversy raging in the minds of the public, and for that matter, among the artists themselves.

Mortimer Adler: Well, Lloyd, I think you are right on that point. I think I didn’t say precisely what I meant. I shouldn’t have said that there is no conflict. I should have said that there *need* be no conflict between representation and abstraction, that there *should* be no conflict. In fact, you are quite right, a conflict does exist.

And I think the reason why a conflict does exist is because, in great paintings and in any piece of music or poem that you read, you will see that there is a tension in every work of art between two basic polarities. And this tension often creates, I think, a tendency on the part of the artist to allow himself to go to one extreme as opposed to the other.

We have talked so far about the opposition between imitation and creation. And on the side of imitation we have talked about representation in a work of art as opposed to abstraction. But this emphasis on representation or the imitative aspect of a work of art is also an emphasis on its content, on its objectivity, its reference to an object and on its realism, its concern with the way reality is. On the other hand, the emphasis on the creative side or on abstraction leads to an emphasis on the subjectivity of the artist rather than the object, what is in him rather than what is in nature and primarily an emphasis on the form of his work, the form of the music or the form of the painting instead of the content.

Now as this tendency is emphasized particularly in the plastic arts, the public tends to give the plastic arts, painting or sculpture, a lit-

erary interpretation. And that is why, I think, the artist tends in the opposite direction toward abstraction. And the poet on the other hand, in order to get rid of this tendency, tends to go in the direction of form and subjectivity as opposed to objectivity and representation.

Now the question might be whether or not these tendencies can be carried to extremes, extremes that cause errors and perversions in the fine arts. In fact, we have a question here from Mr. E.V. Sayers of Palo Alto in which Mr. Sayers asks, "Is a work of art, however representative it may be, always in some degree an abstraction?" And then he goes on to ask, "Is there a limit beyond which art cannot go in this direction, in the direction of abstraction and still remain valid as art?"

I think, Mr. Sayers, there is a limit. When one goes to the extreme of abstraction, an extreme which removes all representation, all reference to objects, that totally eliminates the imitative aspect from the work of art, then the work cannot possibly have any intelligibility left. It becomes too subjective, it becomes almost incommunicable. Nothing is communicated because the person has nothing to refer to. And the work of art, then, in a sense, reduced to sheer form without any content becomes a perverted piece of work of mere formalism.

Now if you go to the opposite extreme, the extreme of representation without any abstraction, without any subjectivity, the work will then have no universal significance. It becomes mere journalism, mere reporting of a single historical fact or something present and seen. It becomes copying. And then the work says nothing either. It becomes sheer materialism as the other sheer formalism in which the mind of the artist is absent.

Now I think the great German poet Goethe has resolved this opposition of tendencies towards the representative, towards the abstract, towards the imitative, towards the creative in art, in a magnificent statement. Goethe says, "The artist stands in a double relation to nature. He is at once its master and its slave. He is its master in so far as he is creative and transforms it. He is its slave in so far as he is imitative and has to borrow from nature."

And the two bad extremes in art, in all the arts, come from slavishness on the one hand, where the artist is a slavish copyist, a slavish imitator of nature, or from the opposite extreme which the abstract tendency leads to, where the artist has contempt for nature.

BAD ART IS STILL ART

Lloyd Luckman: Well, Dr. Adler, right there—

Mortimer Adler: Yes, Lloyd?

Lloyd Luckman: You've been using this phrase "good art" and "bad art" quite a number of times. And we've received some questions here, one that I would like to bring up right now on good and bad art. This one is from Mr. John Hayes of San Francisco. And he suggests that in all fields of art, useful as well as fine, we ought to reserve the term "art" only for the good works and not to apply it to these poor or mediocre works. Now, have you any comment on Mr. Hayes's proposition?

Mortimer Adler: Yes, Lloyd. Mr. Hayes, I do have a comment. I have, in fact, three comments on your proposition.

First, I don't agree with what you say though I think I understand why you say it. The term "art" is sometimes used as a term of praise and sometimes as a descriptive term. It is used as a term of praise when someone does a piece of work and we say, "Oh, that's really art," meaning it is a good piece of work. Well, we use the word "art" to say it is a good piece of work. But I think the word "art" should be used as a descriptive term and should be applied to good art and bad art, the best and the worst works of art.

And when it is so applied, when we apply the word "art" descriptively to good and bad, we face, of course, the problem that is left, the question, What is the distinction between good art and bad art? In fact, that is two problems, not one. There is an esthetic problem there, the problem of the good and the bad in works of art in terms of beauty and ugliness. And this leads to all the questions of appreciation, standards of criticism, and so forth. And then there is the moral or political question of good and bad in a work of art conceived as the work being beneficial or injurious. And this leads to questions of moral censorship and political regulations of works of art.

I'm going to take the second question first. The first question is about beauty, and that is dealt with in our program on the Great Idea of Beauty. But let me turn at once to the question of good and bad in works of art in terms of whether the work of art is beneficial or injurious, the morally or politically good and bad aspect of the fine arts—I'm talking only about the fine arts.

What is its problem? Here again, we have another basic tension, this time between two things, the artist on the one hand and the moralist or the statesman on the other. And this tension is sometimes expressed in terms of “art for art’s sake,” as the artist would have it, or “art for man’s sake,” as the moralist and the statesman would have it.

THE MORALIST VERSUS THE ARTIST

Let me see if I can state this issue by first stating what the moralist’s side of it is and then what the artist’s side of it is. From the moralist’s point of view the fine arts—painting, music, drama, poetry—these affect human beings. They have an effect on human emotions, on human attitudes, on human conduct. Hence, why shouldn’t the moralist criticize a work of art in terms of its moral significance or its political effect? In the tradition of Western civilization, this has been done again and again. It started with Plato. Plato, you will recall, in *The Republic*, in his ideal state, threw the poets out because he thought they had a bad effect. And he wanted to regulate, as he did in *The Republic* and in *The Laws*, the music that children in the public would hear, because he thought that certain kinds of music would excite them in the wrong way. Throughout the whole of Western civilization the theater has been under censorship, music has been under censorship, and as you know, novels and other pieces of writing have been censored on moral grounds.

And in our own day, in our own day we see another example of this in Nazi Germany and in Communist Russia where the arts have been under political regulation to make them conform to the regnant ideologies in those countries. In our own country there has been a great stir, as you know, about motion pictures, about comic books, about jazz, particularly in connection with children. Well, these are arts, kinds of popular art, which are again subject to moral and political scrutiny in terms of their effects upon human beings.

The opposite point of view is that of the artist. The artist says, “I should be concerned only with the rules of my art. My only obligation is to produce well, according to the rules of my art, the thing I am trying to make. I have as much right to my freedom of expression as any other individual has. It is the fact that my freedom of expression is part of a general common right of free speech. Moreover,” he says to the moralist and the statesman, “you, being concerned with these matters, do not understand the technique of my art. You are ignorant with respect to it and incompetent to tell

me how to produce a good work.” In fact, he might go on to say, “The freedom of the artist in creating works of fine art is exactly the same as the freedom of the scientist in his pursuit of knowledge and truth.”

The scientist is concerned exclusively with the pursuit of truth; the fine artist is concerned exclusively with the production of beautiful things, things of beauty. As opposed to both the scientist and the artist, the prudent man, the moralist or statesman, is concerned with goodness, the moralist with conditions of the good life, the statesman with the conditions of a good society.

The suggestion is that the prudent man has no business telling the artist and the scientist how to produce beauty and pursue the truth, any more than they can tell him what are the conditions of a good life and a good society. Each should have an autonomy in his own field.

Lloyd Luckman: Now, I wonder really, Dr. Adler, if art and morality can be separated quite that sharply. After all, we have to admit that works of art do affect human beings, whether they affect them for good or for evil, right?

Mortimer Adler: Yes, indeed.

Lloyd Luckman: Well, then does the solution lie perhaps in distinguishing not the way you have but between the work of art and the man who made it? Now this distinction comes to me as a suggestion from one of our correspondents, a Mrs. Marilyn Follis of Oakland, because she suggests it this way, that when we question the morality of a work of fine art we are questioning the artist as a person rather than the work of art itself. And I wonder if this distinction helps any.

Mortimer Adler: I remember Mrs. Follis’s letter. She draws her question as I recall, Lloyd, from Maritain’s excellent book, *Art and Scholasticism*. Am I right about that?

Lloyd Luckman: Yes.


Mortimer Adler: Perhaps it might help then if I were to read a passage from Maritain’s book, which has a bearing on the conflict between the artist and the moralist, between the artist and the man of prudence.

Let me do that right now because I think it has a direct bearing on

this problem. Maritain was deeply concerned in this book with this question and he says that the work of art is the object of a singular conflict of virtues: the virtue of prudence on the one hand which is concerned with morality and the good life, the virtue of art on the other hand which is concerned with producing things of beauty. “What makes the conflict so bitter,” he says, “is the fact that art is not subordinate to prudence as knowledge, for instance, is subordinate to wisdom.” “Nothing concerns art,” he goes on, “but its objects. It has no concern whatever with the good life or the condition of the subject for the art and prudence each claim dominion over every product from man’s hands. In finding fault with a work of art the prudent man, firmly established upon his moral virtue, has the certitude that he is defending against the artist a sacred good, the good of man. And he looks down upon the artist as upon a child or a madman. But perched on his intellectual habit the artist is certain of defending a good which is no less sacred, the good of beauty.”

But Maritain seems to feel that this conflict is not easily resolvable, in fact, not resolvable except in what might be called the ideal case. I would like to add here, Mrs. Follis, that in my youth, I was so fascinated with this problem that I wrote a whole book on this subject. This book, *Art and Prudence*, was mainly set off by my concern with the regulation of the motion picture, that great popular democratic art. I was concerned with the issue of artistic excellence in the motion picture as opposed to the moral and political problems of regulation. And in this book I finally came to the only solution I could come to on the subject, which in a sense is one I learned from Maritain. The solution, I think, can be expressed somewhat this way. Ideally—I am saying ideally—one and the same man should be both an artist and a moral or prudent man. If that could happen, then since the work of art expresses the whole man, the man as an artist as well as the artist as a man, it will have both moral and political excellence. But this is an ideal solution; it seldom is achieved in fact and so the problem remains just as difficult as you have so far seen it debated.

There is one other way of stating the resolution of this problem. And I did that in my book on *Art and Prudence*. It comes from the English typographer and art critic Eric Gill, in a book that I recommend to all of you, an excellent book called *Beauty Looks after Herself* Eric Gill says, and this is his basic maxim, “Look after goodness and truth, and beauty will take care of itself,” that is, if the artist is concerned with what is good and what is true, the work will be beautiful. Now I say that that proposition, that that basic maxim can be converted into this equally true one: let the artist

look after beauty, if he looks after beauty well enough, then truth and goodness will also take care of themselves. That is as much as I can say in the resolution of that very difficult problem. 

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