

TOWARDS A VIRTUE THEORY OF ART

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In this paper I sketch a virtue theory of art, analogous to a virtue theory of ethics along Aristotelian lines. What this involves is looking beyond a parochial conception of art understood as work of art, as product, to include intentions, motives, skills, traits, and feelings, all of which can be expressed in artistic activity. The clusters of traits that go to make up the particular virtues of art production and of art appreciation are indeed virtues in part because, when they are expressed in artistic activity, that activity is chosen for its own sake, 'under the concept of art'; and also they are virtues in part because, when they are so expressed, the activities are themselves partly constitutive of human well-being, along with other activities, including leading an ethical life, and what Aristotle called contemplation. With a virtue theory of art before us, we can begin to see the point of art, to see why art matters to us as human beings.

I

THERE is an analogy, which I think goes deep, between ethics and art. Aristotle, and Plato before him, although they disagreed about the nature and extent of the disanalogies, used the idea of craft to throw light on the idea of ethics.¹ I mainly intend to go in the other direction, using ethics, and specifically Aristotle's ideas about ethics, to throw light on art. To understand art in this way—analogueous to understanding ethics as Aristotle understood it—will involve operating with a concept of art that is at a sufficient level of generality to make it possible for us to understand, and to engage emotionally with, the concerns and interests in artmaking and art appreciation that can unite us across different times and across diverse cultures—to locate the concepts in our wider thinking and cultural practices, in order to help us to understand the *point* of the concepts and why they, and the practices in which they are embedded, matter to us as human beings.

¹ For discussion, see for example Terence Irwin's *Plato's Ethics* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1995). For detailed discussion of the craft analogy in Aristotle, see Sarah Broadie's *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1994).

Towards the end of the paper, it will emerge that the connection between ethics and art is more than just analogy. Instead, artistic activity, as expression of the virtues of artmaking and art appreciation, will, along with ethical activity and what Aristotle called contemplative activity, be a constituent part of what goes to make up human well-being. So the version of virtue theory that I am advocating is not one according to which virtuous dispositions are *central* to the theory, nor is it one according to which such dispositions are treated as being of non-instrumental value, as if having such virtues is the ultimate goal of all action, of all life.

This is not to say that one *cannot* live without art, any more than it would be true to say that one cannot live without ethics.² But art, like ethics, is not a luxury good: without art, as without ethics, one cannot do well: one's life would be profoundly impoverished. I will try to point towards some aspects of this thought in some brief closing comments on a passage from Joseph Conrad.

II

As my concern in this paper is with a virtue theory of art, my focus will inevitably extend beyond just the concept of art understood as the concept of *work of art*. But this is where I will begin, simply because this is the focus of many philosophers who discuss the concept of art. What I will argue is that it is too quick to conclude that the concept of art, thus understood, has changed, simply on the strength of the premise that what is taken to be art has changed: we can happily embrace the idea that what we take to be art can change across times and across cultures, whilst not embracing the idea that the concept of art changes across times and across cultures.

Jerrold Levinson discusses this in a number of papers on the definition of art.³ He says, 'The concept of art has certainly changed over time. There is no doubt of that.'⁴ Our current concept of art 'has no content beyond what art *has been*'.⁵ In contrast, our earlier concept (in the eighteenth century for example) involved such notions as aesthetic aim and aesthetic experience, but 'the return to a traditional notion of aesthetic aim or aesthetic experience seems blocked by the undeniable evolution of art beyond this sort of contemplative,

² This is why the line from Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, 'First food and then morality' ('Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral') is such a bleak line.

³ See, for example, Jerrold Levinson 'Defining Art Historically', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 19 (1979), pp. 232–250, 'Refining Art Historically', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 47 (1989), pp. 21–33, and 'Extending Art Historically', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 51 (1993), pp. 411–423.

⁴ 'Defining Art Historically', p. 246.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

perceptually-based conception, as evidenced by Conceptual art, Minimal art, Performance art'.⁶ The argument, then, as I understand it, seems to be that what is deemed to be art—the extension of the concept—has changed, and therefore the concept of art has changed.⁷

The argument is in general not a good one: in the case of many concepts, their extension is determined by an additional contextual element, so it cannot be the case that, for all concepts, difference in extension *implies* difference in concept. Consider the concept of the obscene. Some things that we do not consider obscene today—kinds of action or ways of dressing for example—would certainly have been considered obscene in the eighteenth century. But it does not follow that the concept of the obscene has changed just because the truth value of the judgement has changed. No, 'obscene' means what it has always meant, namely (roughly speaking) 'that which is offensive to the accepted standard of decency or modesty'. In the eighteenth century, doing an act of some sort would have been obscene because it would have offended *their* standard of decency, and today doing an act of just the same sort would not be obscene because it would not offend *our* standard of decency. What has changed—indeed what has changed substantially and dramatically—is the standard and not the concept.

Similarly when we come to the concept of art, we are by no means obliged to accept that difference in concept is the only explanation available for difference in extension. Consider Arthur Danto's thought experiment of a Robert Morris pile of hemp turning up in Antwerp in the seventeenth century.⁸

⁶ 'Refining Art Historically', p. 22. Summing up his position at the beginning of his 'Extending Art Historically', Levinson says 'Virtually all concepts, we may safely venture, are subject to historical evolution. In any event, the concept of art is clearly no exception. What was understood by the term "art" in 1790 is not the same thing as is understood by the term today, a mere two centuries later; what items or activities would have counted, the reasons why they would have so counted, and what would have been the paradigms with reference to which counting would have been assessed, were dramatically different' (p. 411).

⁷ Robert Stecker, in his book *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State U.P., 1997), has an argument that reaches more or less the same conclusion. He first considers the idea that the concept of art since Plato 'has undergone considerable change', but he then goes on to say, 'However, I think it is better, and more in keeping with current tendencies of thought, to think of our concept as different from both Plato's and the eighteenth century's. The extension picked out by our concept is so very different, and recall that it is the extension of a term or concept that a definition is fashioned to pick out' (p. 17). Here the argument seems to be that we need a different concept of art in order adequately to capture the difference in extension, whereas Levinson's seems to be that it follows from the fact of changed extension that there is a different concept (or perhaps that the fact of changed extension counts as evidence for a different concept).

⁸ Arthur Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard, MA: Harvard U.P., 1981), p. 45. I do not want to attribute to Danto any particular conclusion from this thought experiment. (Thanks to Peter Kivy for discussion here.)

One can surely agree that the pile of hemp could not have existed *as an artwork* in those days, but one can then *disagree* about the explanation of the outcome of the thought experiment. The explanation which would be offered by Levinson would be that the concept of art has changed. The alternative explanation parallels the earlier example of the obscene. The thought experiment yielded up a belief that a pile of hemp would not be taken to be an artwork in the seventeenth century because what was imagined was introducing the pile of hemp into a cultural context of artmaking—call it a tradition for short—as it then *actually* was, and of course it is quite right that the tradition, thus understood, simply was not ready for such a revolution.

Of course one should willingly accept that there are parochial and temporally bound conceptions of art which delineate, roughly speaking, the standards and traditions that are extant at any particular time and place. So, for example, we have the eighteenth-century Western European conception of ‘fine art’ which included as art just painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, and music.⁹ Similarly, one might try to delineate what kinds of actions, ways of dressing, and so on, were considered obscene at the time that the trial of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was underway. But to focus exclusively on such a parochial and timebound notion can lead us to lose sight of what is shared with others who do not share *that* notion—with, for example, ‘art’ of the fourteenth century, and with non-Western ‘art’.¹⁰ If, on the other hand, we shift our focus to a broader notion, according to which fourteenth-century art and non-Western art are understood as being art *as such*, then we stand a chance of being able to see what is shared by us as human beings across times and cultures, and thus to see why it is important across times and cultures for very much the same reasons. Of course, trying to find what is shared across times and cultures, once the superficialities are stripped away, is no easier in respect of art than it is in respect of ethics; stripping away what is ‘merely’ contingent

⁹ See Peter Kivy’s *Philosophies of the Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993). For discussion, see Nick Zangwill, ‘Are There Counterexamples to Aesthetic Theories of Art?’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 60 (2002), pp. 111–118.

¹⁰ See Graham Oppy, ‘On Defining Art Historically’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 32 (1992), pp. 153–161, and Stephen Davies, ‘Non-Western Art and Art’s Definition’, in N. Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin U.P., 2000), pp. 199–216.

is not right, for what is merely contingent might include contingencies that go deep into what is universal in human nature.¹¹

III

This now brings me to the analogy that I want to draw between art and ethics, with the latter notion understood, roughly, as concerned with the deeper question of what makes a good life, and not with some parochial, more superficial, notion of morals or morality, in which someone might remark ‘Those people, they’ve got no morality; they go around naked all the time.’ What, then, do we need to have on the side of art if we do not want to work with an equally superficial notion?¹²

First, as I have already made clear, we need to work with a notion that will help us to see why art, like ethics, matters to us as human beings, and, for this purpose, to give definitional priority to the concept of *artwork*, however broadly conceived, runs the risk of our being concerned only incidentally and instrumentally with the various activities, intentions, dispositions, feelings, and so on, that are involved in the whole practice of the production and appreciation (including valuing) of artworks. Secondly, we need to accept that the concept of art, like the concept of ethics and most concepts of things that matter to us, is a concept whose evaluative force can only be properly grasped

¹¹ In this context, Stephen Davies has raised a kind of dilemma which faces Levinson’s definition of art, which he calls the artworld relativity problem. On the one hand, if Levinson’s definition of art is meant only to capture *our* notion of art, then relativism looms. As Davies puts it, ‘there is a tendency for those who would deny that non-Western cultures share our concept of art to describe the products of those cultures in a fashion that ignores the artistic goals, intentions, and achievements that such pieces manifest. This kind of reduction creates the conclusion that art is absent from non-Western cultures because it factors out the “artiness” of their artworks’ (‘Non-Western Art and Art’s Definition’, in Carroll, *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 199–216). On the other hand, if it is accepted that there is a concept of art that is shared with other cultures and times, then this is not what we have been provided with; all we have is a definition of something which is admitted to be parochial. In this connection, Dominic McIver Lopes (in ‘Art Without “Art”’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 47 [2007], pp. 1–15) has rightly argued that, with respect to any particular culture, there are two questions: whether that culture has art; and whether that culture has a concept of art. The answers to these questions are doubly dissociable: there is no implication from one to the other. In respect of both, the question is empirical. I agree with Lopes about this (personal correspondence), as I do not insist that either art or the concept of art is universal. But I do find the idea of their universality attractive (perhaps the notion of being pan-cultural is better here), and I do insist that we should not focus the debate in a way that in effect closes off from discussion the possibility of their universality.

¹² Stuart Hampshire has argued that ‘there are no problems of aesthetics comparable with the problems of ethics’; see his ‘Logic and Appreciation’, in W. Eaton (ed.), *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Oxford U.P. 1954), pp. 161–69, esp. p. 162. But for a thorough response, see Eddy Zemach ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Ethics–Aesthetics Parallelism’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 29 (1971), pp. 391–398.

‘from the inside’, from within the practices of production and of appreciation, where the importance and point of the practices can be given due weight to those who engage in them—where what is done is done ‘under the guise of the good’ as David Velleman has put it.¹³

The idea of ethics and of art being practised under the guise of the good points us towards intention and motive as the place to start, and here the analogy between ethics and art is both immediately striking and helpful to my overall purpose.¹⁴ First, having the right ethical intentions and motives is a necessary requirement for ethical action or what I will from now on call virtuous action. As Aristotle put it, it is necessary that the action be chosen ‘for its own sake’.¹⁵ And the same idea in principle applies to art; as Richard Wollheim said, ‘the central case, which must be our starting point, is where what we regarded as a work of art has in point of fact also been produced as a work of art’, or as he says elsewhere in the same essay, ‘produced under the concept of art’.¹⁶ Secondly, the notions of intention and motive point also in the other direction so to speak, not only towards their product in ethical action or in artmaking, but also towards the traits of character and personality from which such intentions and motives spring. This is a familiar thought in ethics, but in philosophical aesthetics it is one that, although not unexplored recently, is, perhaps, less familiar.¹⁷

Now, the importance of intention and motive, in ethics and in art, might well be accepted, but there are well-known interpretive difficulties. We should not, however, allow the difficulties to obscure the importance, but rather allow them to throw light on the importance. With that in mind, I will briefly consider five such shared interpretive difficulties; no doubt there are several more.¹⁸

¹³ David Velleman, ‘The Guise of the Good’, *Nous*, vol. 26 (1996), pp. 3–26.

¹⁴ I do not want to get into the detail here of just what intentions and motives are, and what the difference is between the two. For discussion, see my *On Personality* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a26–b5, trans. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1925).

¹⁶ Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1980), sections 42 and 46.

¹⁷ The idea has been explored recently, in different ways, by Marcia Eaton in *Aesthetics and the Good Life* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated U.P., 1989), by David Woodruff, ‘A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 35 (2001), pp. 23–36, and briefly by Jonathan Lear in *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988).

¹⁸ One I do not discuss is the relation between moral luck and artistic luck, particularly with reference to Gauguin; see Bernard Williams, ‘Moral Luck’, in his *Philosophical Papers: 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1981), pp. 20–39, and Marcia Eaton, ‘Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral’, *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 67 (1992), pp. 219–240.

The first shared difficulty is whether having the right intentions really is a necessary requirement. In respect of ethical action, Aristotle, of course, thought that it was. But John Stuart Mill, for one, thought that all that mattered in our ethical evaluation of an action was its consequences. Mill said, 'He who saves a man from drowning does what is morally right whether his motive be duty, or the hope of being paid for his trouble.'¹⁹ In respect of art, if we said in a Millian spirit that all that mattered was consequences, we might find appeal in the idea that a perfect forgery has just the same artistic value as the original work even though the intentions 'behind' the two works are radically different. The question of the necessity of the right intentions in art also arises in relation to found objects, to objects made solely for religious or sacrificial purposes, and in other ways.

If, agreeing with Aristotle, we do accept the importance of intentions in evaluating ethical action, there is the second shared difficulty, of saying precisely what intentions count as being the right or appropriate ones. If we were to gloss the thought of a virtuous ethical action being chosen 'for its own sake' as being one that is chosen 'because it is the virtuous thing to do' where this is read *de dicto*, many paradigmatically virtuous actions would be excluded; for example, for it to be a requirement that an act of modesty be done for the reason 'that it is the modest thing to do' would be a parody of what a modest action should be.²⁰ We need something much more open to the possibility that a virtuous action can be done for a *range* of reasons, where that range is in some sense proper to the virtue, with the proviso that these reasons need not be thought of at the time by the virtuous person as being proper to the virtue. Thus one might do a benevolent act of helping someone simply because she needs help. Analogously with art, on the side of production or artmaking, we need to think of the right intentions as not necessarily involving thoughts such as 'because it's what my art requires' (as an artist said to me once when I asked him why he painted his pictures so large that they would not fit into anyone's drawing-room). To produce artworks 'under the concept of art' surely need not be as self-conscious as that, as Levinson and others have helpfully shown.²¹

¹⁹ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 2, para. 19. In various editions.

²⁰ For discussion, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1999), Bernard Williams, 'Acting as the Virtuous Person Acts', in R. Heinaman (ed.), *Aristotle and Moral Realism* (London: UCL Press, 1995), pp. 13–23, reprinted in Williams's *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 2006), pp. 190–197, and my *On Personality* (London: Routledge, 2004).

²¹ And if it did need to be as self-conscious as that, it would very likely exclude much non-Western art, as Stephen Davies has pointed out in 'Non-Western Art and Art's Definition', in N. Carroll (ed.), *Theories of Art Today* (Wisconsin: Wisconsin U.P., 2000), pp. 199–216, at p. 203.

A third shared difficulty with intentions and motives concerns what is sometimes referred to as motivational overdetermination. The question here is whether a motive has to be pure. Kant famously thought that purity of motive was necessary for the goodness of an ethical action; with purity of motive, one's conscience will be clear, 'let the consequences be what they may', as he so starkly put it.²² In contrast, Hume thought that it in no way detracts from the goodness of the action if the motive is both moral and non-moral, done to feel good as well as because it is what virtue requires. 'Now, where is the difficulty in conceiving', Hume said, '...that, from the original frame of our temper, we may feel a desire of another's happiness or good, which, by means of that affection, becomes our own good, and is afterwards pursued, from the combined motives of benevolence and self-enjoyment?'²³ The analogous question in artmaking is whether it detracts from our view of the motive if it includes such aims as: to earn a crust; to please your patron; to terrify the enemy; to make a receptacle which will collect the sacrificial blood with the minimum of spillage.²⁴ And on the side of art appreciation, we might ask what we think of someone who spends twenty minutes looking at a picture in a gallery both in order better to appreciate the picture, and in order to impress the person he is with.²⁵

The fourth and fifth shared interpretive difficulties about intentions are concerned with origins, in the species and the individual—phylogenetic and ontogenetic. Empirical questions and answers are particularly relevant here. In relation to the species—the fourth interpretive difficulty—we ask how and why ethical and artistic activities arose in the first place, perhaps even universally across all cultures. Concerning ethics, we ask what the origins of benevolence and justice were and how ethics emerged from a Hobbesian state of nature, and analogously in art we ask about its origins in first art, such as, for example, cave art. Following on from this, we ask whether our ethical and artistic practices are selectionally advantageous (that is, whether they are traits that are selected for because they improve the chances of survival and reproduction), or whether, alternatively, they are mere by-products or spandrels of some otherwise unconnected function. If they are selectionally advantageous,

²² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), p. 416.

²³ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1978), *Second Enquiry*, Appendix 2, 'Of Self-love'.

²⁴ Compare Stephen Davies, 'Aesthetic Judgements, Artworks and Functional Beauty', *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 56 (2006), pp. 224–241.

²⁵ In relation to these last two points, the question of the doctrine of double effect is relevant, but I will not consider it here.

we need an account of how this could be, given that, to quote two well-known evolutionary psychologists, 'Natural selection is relentlessly utilitarian according to evolution's bizarre and narrow standards of utility.'²⁶ These remarks were about artmaking, but just the same points apply to ethical action.

The fifth and last shared difficulty concerns origins in the individual. How does the child learn to do virtuous ethical actions for their own sake, and, analogously, how does the child learn to produce artworks under the concept of art? Having the right kinds of intentions will depend on having the right dispositions. I will have more to say shortly about dispositions, but we can immediately see that there is a worry about circularity. To do virtuous actions you must first be a virtuous person with virtuous dispositions, and yet to be a virtuous person you must first do virtuous actions.²⁷ We need some kind of story about ethical education according to which the child finds his or her way into the practice with motives that are external to the practice, and then somehow the motives become internalized and the dispositions becomes settled. And we need the same kind of story for art-making and for art appreciation, according to which a child will, through engagement in the practice (child art and so on), come eventually to gain a proper grasp of the concept 'from the inside'.

These last two difficulties about origins raise issues about foundations and justifications, and in turn about naturalism. Here the analogies between ethics and art are very close, and have a direct bearing on our metaphysics and epistemology of value. There is a reading of Aristotle's ethical naturalism according to which he tried, and inevitably failed, to provide a rational foundation for ethics in an account of human nature understood as what John McDowell calls 'first nature', being what is captured in the impersonal perspective that modern science takes of nature.²⁸ McDowell has urged on us another understanding of Aristotle's naturalism, according to which justifications can only be sought from within what he calls second nature, being after the 'onset' of human reason and language. It is possible, of course, to seek scientific explanations of our ethical practices, and indeed first nature will constrain the ways

²⁶ J. Tooby and L. Cosmides, 'Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Towards an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction and the Arts', *SubStance* 94/95, vol. 30, nos. 1 & 2 (2001), pp. 6–27, at p. 10.

²⁷ For discussion, see Myles Burnyeat, 'Aristotle on Learning to be Good', in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 69–92.

²⁸ John McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, and W. Quinn (eds), *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), reprinted in McDowell's *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1998), pp. 167–197. Page references are to this version. The reading of Aristotle that McDowell is objecting to is found in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1985).

in which our second nature can turn out. But first nature is not the place to look for justifications. As McDowell says,

The concepts would not be the same if the facts of (first) nature were different, and the facts help to make it intelligible that the concepts are as they are, but that does not mean that correctness and incorrectness in the application of the concepts can be captured by requirements spelled out at the level of the underlying facts. (p. 193)

If this is true, as I think it is, when I said earlier that the concepts of ethics and art can only be understood from the inside, I could have added that justifications too can only be understood from the inside. Looking for the point of ethics, or for the point of art, from outside the practices will at best reveal explanations of their origins, or of how they came to be what they are; it will not reveal their value, nor will it reveal the reasons—*our* reasons—why we value them. If my approach is to be understood as naturalizing, it should be understood as such with McDowell's helpful distinction in mind.

What I have been trying to draw attention to so far are the shared difficulties in determining precisely what the role is of intentions and motives in understanding and evaluating ethical actions, and analogously, in understanding and evaluating artmaking and artworks. Determining what to say about these difficulties is often highly contentious, both at the level of theory and in relation to any particular case, and I do not want to adjudicate about them here. But thinking about the difficulties returns us to the importance of the concepts of ethics and of art. For we not only need these concepts in order to grasp what intentions, motives, choices, actions, and activities count as specifically ethical or artistic out of all the proliferation of things that we humans engage in. We also need ourselves to possess these concepts in order to be able to count ourselves amongst those who are engaged in the practices from the inside, with the right intentions and motives. In addressing our concerns as interpreters, we must not forget that we are also practitioners, living in a world in which ethics and art—both artmaking and art appreciation—are already up and running.

IV

With these last remarks in mind, I now want to try to add breadth to the analogy between ethics and art; that is to say, I want to look beyond intentions and motives towards two other elements of the Aristotelian model, firstly dispositions, both virtues and skills, and secondly well-being or flourishing—*eudaimonia*.

As we have already seen, Aristotle not only requires that a virtuous ethical action spring from virtuous intentions, motives, and choices, but also that

those intentions and choices in turn are expressions of a settled dispositional state—namely a virtue. For example, a truly generous action will be one that has its source in a generous character trait, where that trait is not only stable but also not unduly restricted in its range of objects. We should remember, however, that it is really an oversimplification to think that for each class of virtuous intention and action, there is a *single* corresponding trait. In reality, when we refer to a trait, such as generosity, we are really picking out a cluster of interlocking traits that enable a person to make generous choices and form generous intentions. Generosity will include traits such as a structured perceptual capacity to help one to perceive where generosity is called for, creativity to help one to spot what is the right way to be generous in the particular circumstances, imagination to help one to envisage how others will respond to what one does or says, and common sense to make sure one's best intentions do not end in tears.²⁹

Once we put aside the oversimplification, it becomes clear that many of the traits in the cluster that we pick out as generosity are very likely to have application elsewhere in a person's life, being expressible not only in generosity, but in, for example, courage and justice, and in intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness. So not only do traits interlock within a given virtue, they also can be deployed and redeployed in a variety of other ethical and intellectual domains—and also in art as I hope to show.

With the oversimplification out of the way, it should also become clear that many of the traits within the cluster that we call generosity are skills rather than virtues. Skills, unlike virtues, are traits that are only conditionally good, or good conditional on being associated with the right motives, intentions, and choices. As such they can also be used for bad ends, just as the skills of imagination and creativity can be used by the torturer, making him even more abominable in our eyes.³⁰ On reflection it begins to seem quite likely that many of us will have skills that are deployed for both good and for bad, or not deployed at all where they should be. Thus someone might be an imaginatively generous friend and colleague, an imaginatively vicious tease, and an unimaginative research scientist. Nevertheless, the central truth remains that the cluster of traits that we call generosity is rightly thought of as a *virtue* and not as a skill in part because, when the trait is expressed in action, that action is chosen for its own sake, where that term is glossed in the appropriate way.

²⁹ Amélie Rorty talks of dispositions of interpretation, tropic dispositions, and self-activating dispositions; see her 'Virtues and Their Vicissitudes', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 13 (1988), pp. 136–148, at pp. 137–138. To this list I have added self-monitoring dispositions; see my *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 158.

³⁰ Echoing the words of Kant on the coolness of the scoundrel in his *Groundwork*, p. 394.

Analogously when we turn to art, we will be concerned with a wide range of traits, such as imagination, insight, sensibility, vision, creativity, wit, authenticity, integrity, intelligence, persistence, open-mindedness, and courage,³¹ and, just as we saw with ethics, many of these traits, being skills, may be redeployed elsewhere in the person's mental economy as part of ethical or prudential or intellectual virtues—or vices. But again we can retain the central truth that this cluster of traits constitutes virtue in part because, when they are expressed in artistic activity, that activity is chosen for its own sake, 'under the concept of art'. In fact, the traits will cluster, in different ways and in different combinations, around at least two kinds of virtue, virtues of production and of appreciation, for which we have a variety of well-known terms—terms such as 'being a great sculptor', and 'being deeply appreciative of literature'.

Another thing which holds these traits together as virtues is that they are expressed with the right feelings. For Aristotle, having the right feelings was one of the necessary conditions for virtuous ethical action, along with having the right intentions, which spring from a stable disposition.³² But we should be cautious, for the analogy with feelings in art is by no means precise. In ethics, one reason why Aristotle argued for the importance of feelings was that someone acting according to reason without having the right feelings would be more prone to weakness of will, and this does not seem to apply in the same way in art. However, another reason for the importance of feelings is more relevant. This is to do with the intuition, which many of us share, that in ethics we are right to think less of the person who does what he ought to do begrudgingly, resentfully, or with an air of indifference—such a person would be less than fully virtuous.³³ And here there is something of an analogue: having your heart in the right place matters too in art—in production and appreciation. We think less of the highly skilled sculptor if we know that she lacks all passion in and for her work; and we think less of the highly discriminatory literary critic if we know that he cares little or nothing for what he so ably pronounces on.

One reason for resisting the idea that the dispositions for artmaking and art appreciation are virtues would be if we embraced Aristotle's doctrine of the unity of the virtues: the doctrine which holds, roughly, that if you have one virtue, then you must have all the virtues; they stand or fall together. But in reality we have no reason to expect to find any necessary correlation within

³¹ Several of these are mentioned in David Woodruff, 'A Virtue Theory of Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol.35 (2001), pp. 23–36.

³² *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a 16–20.

³³ And it is just because someone is less than fully virtuous that they are prone to weakness of will.

an individual person between the virtues involved in art and the virtues involved in ethics. They are doubly dissociable: we know perfectly well that good people can be blind to art; and we know too that bad or profoundly selfish people can be great artists, or critics of superb judgement and taste.³⁴ Whatever one might think of Aristotle's doctrine of the unity of the virtues as applied to ethical virtues (which in my case is not much), it certainly does not apply here.

V

The last element of the Aristotelian model that I want to discuss is human well-being or flourishing. This element is essential in my making out the claim that the dispositions of art production and appreciation are virtues. It is here that the analogy between art and ethics will turn out to be more than just an analogy. Richard Wollheim, in drawing his analogy between art and language, characterized art as being a 'form of life'. I want to characterize art, rather, as a kind of activity that is partly constitutive of well-being, along with ethical activity. By 'constitutive', I mean to contrast this idea of well-being with the idea according to which one engages in some kind of activity *in order* to gain well-being, as if there is some *further* end, perhaps a kind of hedonic mental state, at which one is aiming. Rather, those activities that go to make up the good life simply comprise or constitute what well-being is, and this is what one aims at. Now, before turning to art and well-being, I will make two brief preliminary remarks about Aristotle's own notion of well-being.

In Books I and II of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle identified well-being with virtuous ethical activity as appropriate to an actively participating member of the city-state. But when we come to Book X, Aristotle seems to change tack, saying that 'contemplative activity' or philosophy is the highest form of well-being, and he gives a number of reasons why it is to be preferred. It is controversial whether this represents a real change of mind by Aristotle, and also whether he is recommending contemplative activity to all people above all else regardless of their particular constitution and talents.³⁵ I myself would like to think that perhaps part of what he is aiming at with the notion of contemplative activity or 'the life of the intellect' is the broad, ecumenical notion of putting to use an enquiring mind, engaging in, and discoursing about, the

³⁴ This is discussed in Marcia Eaton, *Aesthetics and the Good Life* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated U.P., 1989), ch. 7.

³⁵ For discussion of this vexed topic, see for example John Cooper, *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1975), his 'Contemplation and Happiness: A Reconsideration', *Synthese*, vol. 72 (1987), pp. 187–216, and Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988).

vast range of deeply important things with which Aristotle was himself concerned. And in this sense contemplative activity is something that is open, more or less, to all of us, without making a sharp break between those of us, like Aristotle, who are in some sense 'in the business' and those who are not.

As a second step towards making Aristotle's account of well-being consistent, I prefer the interpretation of Aristotle according to which his considered position is that contemplative activity, as outlined in Book X, is not being recommended in the same way for all of us all the time. Rather, the answer to the question of what constitutes a good life for a particular person will depend on what sort of a person we are concerned with. The answer will be objective in the sense that it is possible to get it wrong as to what is good for that particular person, but it is not objective in the sense of prescriptively applying in the same way to everyone.

We can now readily integrate artistic activity, understood along analogous ecumenical lines to those I have been urging for contemplative activity, into well-being, into what is constitutive of the good life. And we can do so without being overly prescriptive. Artistic activity, whether of production or appreciation, can rightly be realised in different ways by different people, and can rightly vary in its importance to them. For some, being productive in the arts will be at the heart of a good life, for others less so; for some, life without art to appreciate would be more profoundly impoverished than it would be for others; for some music is what matters, for others it will be literature; and so on. But what is of value, of non-instrumental value, is artistic *activity*, for this, along with ethical and contemplative activity, is what is constitutive of well-being or the good life for us humans, as creatures with reason and language—and, one might add, with imagination.

Not everything that we value is constitutive of the good life. A range of things have value as necessary conditions for well-being, without themselves being part of well-being; for example, food, drink, sleep, good health, peace of mind, are necessary but not constitutive.³⁶ Someone for whom artistic activity was important—all of us, I believe, in our different ways—would not be able to flourish if this activity were closed off from him because one or more of these necessities was not in place: perhaps he is unable to appreciate artworks because, like Philoctetes, he is stuck on an uninhabited island; or perhaps she is unable to practice her art as a sculptor because she cannot afford the materials, or because she is suffering from disabling depression. On this account, then, it is completely clear why a state of affairs such as existed in the former Soviet Union, in which artmaking is severely constrained and artworks are made unavailable for appreciation, would be a world where one could not live life to the full.

³⁶ For discussion, see Robert Heinaman, 'Eudaimonia and Self-sufficiency in the *Nicomachean Ethics*', *Phronesis*, vol. 33 (1988), pp. 31–53.

What would be missing in such a life? Why is artmaking and art appreciation not a luxury, but just as important to our lives as human beings as ethics or contemplation? The first point to make is a negative one, and harks back to my earlier remarks about naturalism and justification: the place to look for an answer to these questions is not in first nature; for example, some evolutionary story about the selectional advantages of the virtues of art to an individual will not answer why artmaking and art appreciation matters *to us*—it will not provide an answer of the kind we wanted, which was one from within second nature, and from with the practice. Beyond that, I cannot say much here to answer these questions (thus the ‘towards’ in the title to this paper). The answer will, I suspect, throw light on the way art, when successful, can bind us together as fellow humans—can appeal to, and reveal, our shared experiences and our shared emotional responses to those experiences. Perhaps a hint of this kind of answer is to be found in some marvellous remarks of Joseph Conrad’s, on what the artist does. The artist, he says,

speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain: to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts; to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspiration, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.³⁷

VI

I have drawn an analogy with Aristotle’s model of ethics not in order to assemble a virtue theory of art of a kind which forges a necessary connection between ethical and artistic virtues, or which places virtuous dispositions at the centre of a theory of art, or which, heaven forbid, makes expression of feelings essential to art production. Rather, it is to use the analogy to throw light on the structure and importance of art and of the concept of art in our lives as human beings, where the notion of human being is already part of second nature, already informed by reason and language.

Having the concept of art, understanding it from the inside, enables one to have the right artistic intentions, feelings, and dispositions; having these dispositions—virtues—enables one to engage in artistic activity; and artistic activity, of production or appreciation, is one of the kinds of activity—of

³⁷ In the Preface to his *The Nigger of The ‘Narcissus’*, edited with an Introduction by C. Watts (London: Penguin, 1963). First published in 1897.

virtuous activity—that is constitutive of well-being. This virtue theory of art draws on concepts of art, and on concepts of well-being, each delineated with the right degree of generality, which can be shared without equivocation by us in the West today, with others in Iraq or China today, and with yet other human beings in the distant past or future.³⁸

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