

Goldie on the Virtues of Art

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Peter Goldie has argued for a virtue theory of art, analogous to a virtue theory of ethics, one in which the skills and dispositions involved in the production and appreciation of art are virtues and not simply mere skills. In this note I highlight a link between the appreciation of art and its production, and explore the implications of such a link for a virtue theory of art.

Introduction

In his paper ‘Towards a Virtue Theory of Art’,¹ Peter Goldie sketches a virtue theory of art analogous to a virtue theory of ethics, one in which the particular traits, skills, and dispositions involved in art production and art appreciation are properly thought of as *virtues*, in part because their expression in artistic activities involves the exercise of such dispositions ‘under the concept of art’, and also because these virtues—along with those of ethics and contemplation—are partly constitutive of human well-being. Understanding the role of virtues in art production and appreciation can help us, Goldie suggests, understand why art might matter to us.

Goldie notes that ‘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 virtues’ (p. 383)—the doctrine that if a person possesses one virtue, she must possess them all. For the virtues of art and the virtues of ethics 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’ (p. 384). But, claims Goldie, so much the worse for the unity of virtues.

In this paper I want to highlight a link between art appreciation and art production, and suggest that although Goldie is entitled to reject the unconstrained application of Aristotle’s doctrine of the unity of virtues, the link between art appreciation and art production suggests that his theory is itself committed to a certain sort of unity: a concordance of the artistic virtues. I will suggest that in certain spheres of artistic endeavour, the link between art appreciation and art production requires that, on a virtue theory account of art, certain artistic virtues naturally and properly belong together. That is, it must be both possible to possess these virtues together and also harmonious that one does so. Whether this is an objection to a virtue theory of art depends on the extent to which this concord challenges Goldie’s ‘deep analogy’ (p. 382) between ethics and art.

1 Peter Goldie, ‘Towards a Virtue Theory of Art’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 47 (2007), pp. 372–387. Subsequent references to this paper are given in the text.

Art Production and Art Appreciation

The link between art appreciation and production I am concerned with is illustrated by a piece of advice often given to aspiring writers on creative writing courses: if you want to write a book, read a library. Or as John Gardner puts it, in his *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*: ‘What this means, in practical terms for the student writer, is that in order to achieve mastery he must read widely and deeply.’² The intention here is to draw a link between the activity of reading and the process of learning the craft of writing a novel. Reading a library of books is one way to develop some of the skills that make up the craft of writing a novel.

This claim is not one about the background conditions necessary for writing a novel, in the manner of Cyril Connolly’s claim about the pram in the hallway being the enemy of good art. Nor is it an exhortation to learn the kind of background skills and traits that will assist in the writing of a novel, but non-artistically as it were: traits such as always saving one’s drafts, or skills such as being able to market oneself to publishers. Rather the claim is one about the ways in which one can acquire some of the artistic skills exercised directly in the production of a novel. Reading widely is a *way of acquiring* skills exercised artistically in writing fiction.

This advice evinces a link between the appreciation of art and its production. One finds similar counsel in other artistic media: for composers to listen to musical works, for visual artists to go out to galleries—in essence, for budding producers of art to go out and appreciate art. Art appreciation can enable one to develop skills exercised in art production. Let me term this the AP link, a link between the appreciation of art and its production.

This link entails no necessary or sufficient conditions on the acquisition of the skills of art production, since it is compatible with the claim both that there will be other ways of acquiring those skills and also that one can engage in appreciation without developing the skills in question. Nevertheless, the AP link identifies one method by which one can acquire skills used in the production of art, a method which has a certain centrality in our practice of art appreciation and production. For it is a fact about artistic practice that we *do* encourage aspiring artists to engage in art appreciation in order to develop the skills used in the production of art. My concern in this paper is how one might explain this link on a virtue theory of art.

In setting out his virtue theory of art, Goldie differentiates skills, traits, and dispositions. Roughly, a virtuous action is one that is done with a virtuous intention, and a virtuous intention is one that arises from a settled virtuous disposition. Dispositions are clusters of skills and traits, where a skill is thought of as something that is only conditionally good. What makes a cluster of skills into a virtue is both that the trait is exercised under the concept of doing something ‘for its own sake’—understood in a wide, maximally charitable way—and that it is a constitutive part of human well-being.

Goldie’s suggestion is that the skills which make up the dispositions involved in the appreciation and production of art are more than ‘mere’ skills: they should be classed as

2 J. Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 9. Cf. Samuel Johnson: ‘The greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading, in order to write; a man will turn over half a library to make one book’ (quoted in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*).

virtues both because they are exercised ‘under the concept of art’, and because they are constitutive of human well-being. And, as Goldie stresses, these traits will cluster ‘around at least two kinds of virtue, virtues of production and of appreciation’ (p. 383). So if the AP link is correct, then the exercise of that cluster of skills which corresponds to the particular virtues of art appreciation can serve as a way to develop and refine skills which underlie the virtues of art production, at least within any particular sphere of artistic activity.³ Can Goldie’s virtue theory of art accommodate this link?

The Concordance of Artistic Virtues

Let us grant for the moment that the dispositions involved in the appreciation and production of arts are virtues proper and not mere skills.⁴ What then follows if one accepts the AP link? The first thing that follows, it seems to me, is that it must be possible to possess the virtues of appreciation and the virtues of production together. If appreciating an artwork virtuously involves the exercise of certain stable traits and skills that can be used to develop skills deployable when producing an artwork virtuously, then there must be some temporal point at which the two sets of skills are both possessed by the subject, for exercise of the first leads temporally to acquisition of the other. This is especially true if the skills and dispositions which make up the artistic virtues are stable in terms of possession. For development of the new skill does not mean that the first disappears: as one begins to maintain and develop the new skill to be used in art production, it overlaps with the virtue being exercised in art appreciation.

This would serve as an objection to Goldie if the virtues involved in each sphere were *singular*, such that they could never be possessed together. So if, for example, being deeply appreciative of literature involved the virtue of open-mindedness, an aliveness to the possibility of alternative points of view, yet being a great writer involved the virtue of single-minded focus, a focus on a particular point of view to the exclusion of all others, then it would be difficult to see how the appreciation of literature could serve as a way of developing the skills involved in producing it. Were this the case, then the fact that exercise of the first could lead to the acquisition of the latter would count against classing the exercise of these skills as the manifestation of particular virtuous dispositions.

This example, however, is unconvincing and there seems no reason to think that any plausible account of the aesthetic virtues will make it impossible for the virtues of appreciation to be possessed in tandem with those involved in its production. The singularity of virtues is false, and no one need be committed to it. The more interesting thing which follows from the AP link, I contend, is not only that it must be possible for the virtues of appreciation to be possessed concurrently with the virtues of production but that it is natural that one does so. The virtues of appreciation and production have a natural fit. This is what I mean by a concordance of the aesthetic virtues.

3 The reason for limiting the AP link to particular spheres of artistic activity is to focus on the clearest examples of a link between appreciation and production: it is not obvious that appreciation of artworks in one medium is a way of developing the skills necessary for production in another. I am assuming that we have an intuitive grasp of what differentiates one sphere of artistic activity from another.

4 For a further defence of the idea that the dispositions involved really are virtues, see Peter Goldie, ‘Virtues of Art’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LXXXII* (2008), pp. 179–195.

Why does a virtue theory of art require this concord? I have already noted that the exercise of appreciative skills is neither necessary nor sufficient for the acquisition of productive skills, for some who possess the former will lack the latter, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the fact that we recommend the appreciation of art to aspiring artists suggests that we take this way of acquiring the skills of art production to have a particularly stable role in our artistic practice. The operative thought motivating the concordance claim is that in order to make sense of this encouragement we need to provide an explanation of why exercise of the set of skills used in the appreciation of art leads to the development of skills used in its production. What is it that determines that exercise of appreciative skills can enable one to develop productive skills? The natural explanation, on a virtue theory account of art, is that that there is a fit between the two sets of virtues. The appreciative virtues naturally and properly belong together with those of art production; that is why being a deeply appreciative lover of art can assist one with becoming a great producer of it.

What does it mean to say that two sets of virtues naturally and properly belong together? To say that two (sets of) skills or virtues naturally and properly belong together is to root the explanation of why exercise of one leads to the development of the other in facts about the nature of the skills in question—whilst leaving it open exactly how that explanation should be filled out.⁵ The explanation could be physical: the skill of fast footwork in boxing may follow naturally from the skill of skipping because both skills are grounded in certain physical facts such as the practitioner's eyesight, calf muscles, and heart rate. Or it may be more abstractly related to brain function and genetics: if it is true that the skills involved in the production of music fit naturally with the skills involved in learning languages, this may be because of the ways in which these skills are encoded in our genes.⁶ Or it may be simply that the two skills draw on the same underlying trait. Talk of a natural fit leaves open the mechanics of the explanation, whilst insisting that such an explanation is grounded in the nature of the skills in question.

To say, then, that the aesthetic virtues of appreciation have a natural fit with the virtues of production is to say that there is an explanation for why exercise of the former leads to the acquisition of the latter which is grounded in natural facts about the nature of the virtues in question. We can leave it open exactly how this explanation is to be elaborated upon: maybe there is a physical brain state which underlies both sets of virtues, or perhaps there are more general virtuous traits of which these virtues are more refined examples. All we require to motivate the thought about concordance is that some explanation can be given. Were no explanation possible it would be mysterious to us, from within the practice of art appreciation and production, why students were encouraged to engage in the former to develop the latter. The fact that there is a natural fit explains the AP link, and although Goldie need not endorse any claim about the unity of aesthetic virtues, the force of the AP link requires that we recognize their harmony. The virtues of appreciation and the virtues of production naturally and properly belong together.

5 The facts in question may be facts about our 'second nature', as Goldie puts it, channelling McDowell (pp. 380–381). See John McDowell, 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', reprinted in his *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1998), pp. 167–197.

6 As claimed by one of the protagonists in Ian McEwan's *Amsterdam* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998).

Skills or Virtues?

Given the AP link, then, a virtue theory of art is going to be committed to a concordance of the aesthetic virtues. One concern is that this could pose a challenge to Goldie's attempts to draw an analogy between ethics and art; in particular, to his claim that the skills involved in art appreciation and production are importantly like the ethical virtues. There are two ways one might motivate this challenge. The first is to focus on the AP link itself: to the extent that this link captures something important about the relationship between art appreciation and production, it seems to point to a wider truth about the ways in which the exercise of one skill can be used in the development and acquisition of another. But this seems a wider truth about *skills* in general. So unless something similar takes place in the realm of the virtues, we seem to have an important difference between the skills and traits involved in the arts and those involved in ethics—and a reason to reject the assimilation of artistic skills into the category of virtues.

Secondly, one might worry that there is no comparable equivalent to the concordance of artistic virtues in the domain of ethics, and that this poses a *prima facie* challenge to the categorization of artistic dispositions as virtues and not simply mere skills. The concordance of artistic virtues grounds the AP link, and makes sense of the injunction to read more in order to write better. And one might feel that for Goldie's analogy to be persuasive, something similar should be true of the ethical virtues. Otherwise we have a *prima facie* distinction between the skills of art and the ethical virtues and a further reason to balk at their assimilation.

These challenges share a common root: they use the AP link to identify an aspect of artistic skills and dispositions and claim that this aspect is lacking in the case of ethics. This distinction is meant to put pressure on Goldie's attempt to categorize these skills as virtues proper. It does no more than that, because a virtue theory of art is not committed to the skills and dispositions involved in art appreciation and production being like the ethical virtues in every possible way. A defender of the virtue theory could accept these points whilst claiming that this is simply one way in which the aesthetic virtues differ from those of ethics, though given the centrality of the analogy in motivating the theory, there would be something disappointing in this acquiescence.

Regardless, there is room for a more spirited response. Certainly with regards to the concordance of the aesthetic virtues, the distinction between ethics and art seems to be one of degree rather than kind. That there is a kind of natural fit of the ethical virtues is argued for in this lovely passage by Iris Murdoch:

[I]f we reflect upon courage and ask why we think it to be a virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what distinguishes courage from rashness, ferocity, self-assertion, and so on, we are bound, in our explanation, to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage... is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving.⁷

Murdoch's point can be put like this: expression of an ethical virtue such as courage will necessitate the expression of other ethical virtues—a courageous person must be patient in her dealings with other people, must be intelligent in appraising the options open to her, and so on. These virtues fit together, as expression of one draws upon the others.

7 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p. 56.

We can use an idea from Goldie's paper to explain why this should be so. Discussing the ethical virtues, he notes that the traits which underlie a virtue such as generosity, for instance the discriminatory capacity to determine when a certain action is appropriate, are ones that will show up in other virtuous dispositions.

[M]any 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. (p. 382)

The fact that the ethical virtues draw upon common traits provides some explanation for the concordance identified by Murdoch. And it makes sense of the claim that the ethical virtues have a natural fit, for it provides an explanation of why these virtues fit together which focuses on the nature of the virtues in question. The ethical virtues fit together because they draw upon the same basic skills and dispositions: courage and generosity have a natural fit because of the role of certain traits expressible in both courageous and generous action. This explanation—an explanation that focuses on the nature of the virtues in question—is one that can be used to support the claim that the ethical virtues, like the aesthetic virtues, naturally fit together.⁸

What about the AP link—the claim that within a particular sphere of artistic activity, the exercise of the skills of art appreciation can enable one to develop skills involved in art production? Does something similar hold for the skills and traits that make up the ethical virtues? Addressing this question requires engagement with issues about the role of moral education in creating and maintaining virtuous dispositions, but at a general level we can see how a positive answer might proceed. What the defender of a virtue theory of art has to make plausible is that exercising one set of ethical virtues could be a way of coming to possess another; for example, that one could learn to be brave through being kind.

The interlocking nature of the ethical virtues described by Murdoch gives this claim some plausibility. Acting kindly towards your friend will sometimes involve telling her something she does not want to hear—for example that her article is not ready for publication. And loyalty towards her may involve sticking up for her when people are making comments behind her back. Acting virtuously in these cases requires one to act bravely—to demonstrate the virtue of courage. Whether it is telling her something that she does not want to hear, or sticking up for her in a crowd, one has to act bravely in order to be virtuous. And it seems plausible that one way one could come to possess the various skills and traits which make up the virtue of courage is by engaging in this sort of virtuous action. In acting kindly or in acting loyally, one finds oneself having to act courageously—and, over time, acting in such a virtuous way could instil and maintain a stable disposition towards acting courageously. Acting kindly can teach one what it is to be brave—and assist in the development of a stable, virtuous disposition. Even in the case of the ethical virtues, exercise of one set of virtues can be a way of coming to possess another.

8 In the section from which the passage above is quoted, Murdoch is careful not to commit herself to Aristotle's doctrine of the unity of virtues, saying only that reflection 'rightly tends to unify the virtues' (*The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 56). That an explanation can be given of why certain virtues naturally fit together does not entail that if a subject possesses one, she must possess the other.

Indeed, one might go further and suggest that, far from presenting a challenge to a virtue theory of art, the concordance of aesthetic virtues illustrates how deep the analogy between art and ethics really goes, for it illustrates the extent to which the aesthetic virtues are bound up with the ethical virtues.⁹ Certainly this is the view that Murdoch takes, arguing that reflecting upon the way in which an observer of art appreciates an artwork can help us develop a moral psychology which ‘does not contrast art and morals, but shows them to be two aspects of a single struggle. . . . Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man.’¹⁰ In this paper I have argued that a defender of a virtue theory of art can and should accept the claim that appreciation of artworks can enable one to develop skills used in the production of art; Murdoch’s comments suggest that we may be able to push this line of thought further, and provide a further strand of support for Goldie’s claim that the skills and dispositions of art should be classified as virtues.¹¹

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9 Goldie provides an argument in this vein in his ‘Virtues of Art’, pp. 188–190, in a section called ‘The Interweaving of the Virtues of Art with Other Virtues’.

10 *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 40.

11 My thanks to Peter Goldie and an anonymous reviewer for their comments. And thanks to Nikhil Gomes for the Gardner quote.