

## Art and Morality

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*“If Art must take cognizance of Morality, then equally Morality must take cognizance of Art. Indeed, almost everything that is alive and imaginative about morality comes from the leavening influence of Art. The chief moral effect of art, including literature, I would like to say, lies in its unique power to stimulate and develop the most important human faculty, the imagination. And, as Shelley says, the Imagination is the greatest single instrument of moral good.”*

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What is the relation of art to morality? We could spend a great deal of time at the outset trying to define the words “art” and “morality”. Instead, however, we shall evade these trying questions, and assume that we already attach some common meaning to these terms. Paintings, sculptures, musical compositions, poems, plays, and novels can all be works of art; we shall not stop to argue which works in these media succeed in being works of art. We shall be concerned to discover what the effect of these works is on the moral conduct of the persons who see, hear, or read them—whether, for example, it leads them to

violate any of the Ten Commandments or other rules that would generally be called moral; and what is to be done when aesthetic values, which we experience primarily through works of art, conflict with moral values.

### I

Let us consider first the most prevalent conception of the relation between art and morality – what we may call the moralistic conception. According to this, art is, at least, a harmless interlude in the serious business of life, and at worst, a menace to society and morality. Art is so considered because it gives people

unorthodox ideas; it disturbs them; it emphasizes individuality rather than conformity; and it may be dangerous in undermining beliefs on which (it is thought) our society rests. Art is a kind of gadfly stinging at the body of established beliefs, often at precisely those places where custom does not wish to be disturbed; art is always at work, breeding discontent, rebellion, individual difference, conformism – and it seems as if art is always being directed against the established mores of the day, never in their favour. Witness the complaints of *Life* magazine and others about twentieth-century American writers, who for the most part make heroes out of rebels and emotionally “maladjusted” people, and refuse to sing the praises of the solid citizens without whom industry and technology could not progress. Because of this, art is looked upon with suspicion by the Guardians of Custom. When art does not affect people much, it is considered a harmless pleasure, an escape, a luxury, something which is unfortunately there and has to be put up with because some people seem to want it – but which may become, at any moment, insidious and dangerous, gnawing at the substructure of our most cherished beliefs and attitudes.

The most famous historical representatives of this view were Plato and Tolstoy; and this is the more surprising since both of them were great artists. Plato was no moralist in his less famous works in which he

discussed art – in the *Ion*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*. But in his most renowned work, the *Republic*, Plato takes a highly moralistic view of art. There he is concerned to setup an ideal state, or republic. Everything hinges on the kind of ruler that is at the helm of the ship of state, for the rulers are all-powerful and not subject to popular vote. Plato spends many pages describing in detail the training of these rulers-to-be. If their morality is to be pure and undefiled, they must be kept away from all undermining influences, however subtle. They must not be permitted to listen to sensuous music, or to witness stage presentations in which bad people triumph, or in any way exposed to art which would loosen the moral fiber of the impressionably growing child or cause him to swerve from the path of austerity which must be his if he is to remain incorruptible in his future position of state. We could spend considerable time, if we had it, debating whether or not Plato’s stricture upon art, in the interests of the future rulers of state would (if adopted) make the rulers more capable or less so than they would otherwise have been. Personally I find this extremely dubious: a ruler-to-be should know the full facts of life as early as possible; and it would seem that the only way to combat evil is first to know something about it. But whatever we may decide about this, we should note that all these strictures are imposed for a reason; the delights of

art are sacrificed, reluctantly but firmly, not because Plato had no respect or love for art, but because he was convinced that the most important thing of all, even more than art, was the welfare of the entire state – a state in utter chaos or corruption could produce nothing, including art itself. Where the welfare of the state was involved, even so great a price as that of art was not too great a one to pay. For no lesser reason would so great a thing be sacrificed. And for the masses of humanity, where the education of future rulers was not concerned, there was to be no limitation of art at all.

Tolstoy's condemnation of art was more sweeping. After he had written *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and almost all of his great fictions, he underwent a religious conversion which caused him to condemn all art except that which, as he put it, "tends to deepen the religious perceptions of the people". Art which did not have a religious theme was still acceptable as long as it tended to unite mankind into one great Christian community. But art which concerned itself with the political squabbles of a particular time or place, or sexual conflicts and disturbances, or with the life of the upper classes and its ensuring triviality and boredom, all this Tolstoy condemned without further ado. Even more sweeping, all art which was not simple enough to be understood and enjoyed at once by all people, even the simplest peasant, was given the axe. Thus Shakespeare,

Milton, Beethoven, Wagner, and countless others, together with almost the entire corpus of nineteenth century literature including Tolstoy's own great novels, were all, at one stroke, thrown into the trash heap. One cannot accuse Tolstoy on inconsistency, or of shrinking from the task of applying his own principles. One can, however, question the principles that implied such a wholesale condemnation as this. But to do so here would require a detailed critique of that form of early and rather primitive Christianity which Tolstoy embraces at this period of his life; and that is far removed from our subject here. Tolstoy, like Plato, condemned art for reasons of morality, being convinced that when it comes to a conflict between them, it is art that must go. From the point of view of morality, art is The Enemy, and this enemy must be utterly squelched. For Tolstoy, art is not merely the harmless pleasure of an idle moment – art (most art, at any rate) is a disturber and uprooter of the True Morality. Art, in order to be permissible at all, must be used completely and utterly in the service of morality.

Not all of us would go along with the special twists given the moralistic theory by Plato and Tolstoy, but many people, including perhaps the majority of Americans, tend to accept the general position of Moralism. They may not think that art and morality conflict as readily or as often as Plato and Tolstoy believed but they think that art is a servant of morality, and

that in cases of conflict between art and morality it should always be morality that is the victor.

## II

Let us, however, turn to an exactly opposite kind of view, which often goes by name of aestheticism. According to this view, art is above all other things of significance in this world and nothing should interfere with its freedom to do whatever it pleases. If morality disagrees, so much the worse for morality. If the masses fail to understand art or to appreciate its enormous power to receive the sublime experiences it can give, at least to the select few, well then, so much the worse for the masses. As an extreme example of this, let us listen to the poet George Moore:

"What care I that some millions of wretched Israelites died under Pharaoh's lash or Egypt's sun? It was well that they died that I might have the pyramid to look on, or to fill a musing hour with wonderment. Is there one among us who would exchange them for the lives of the ignominious slaves that died? What care I that the virtue of some 16-year-old maid was the price paid for *Ingres' La Source*? That the model died of drink and disease in the hospital is nothing when compared with the essential that should have *La Source*, that exquisite dream of innocence..."

We may also remember Mussolini's son-in-law waxing lyrical in his description of a bomb exploding among a crowd of unarmed Ethiopians.

Most of us would feel revolted at such all extreme version of the Aestheticist's hypothesis. And, of course, we need not go so far. But before attempting to dilute the force of such remarks as those of George Moore, let us see wherein lies the power and the peculiar force of the Aesthetician's position. What is the goal of life, the Aestheticist asks, if it is not to be as fully, as richly, as intensely alive as we can possibly become – or in Walter Pater's words, "to burn with a hard gemlike flame"? or

"to choose one crowded hour of glorious life, to seize experience at its greatest magnitude? And this is precisely our experience of art; it is living in the best way we know how. Far from being a hand maiden to other goals, art gives us immediately, and richly, the best there is in life, intense awareness – it gives us what life itself aims at becoming, but seldom achieves outside of art." (Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, p. 563.)

So if there are any morally undesirable side-effects of art, they do not really matter beside this all-important experience that art can give us and nothing else can. Art and art alone can make us really alive; art and art alone can give us an experience of unmatched richness, unity, intensity, complexity – all at the same time. Art and art alone can give us in miniature, in capsule form, the characteristic values of existence, all concentrated in one aesthetic object, it can draw all the loose and varied strands of human experience into a sharp and vivid

focus. Great works of art alone are capable of giving us this experience, which can be at once sublime and ecstatic in its beauty and shattering in its intensity. Only in art do we really come alive; in all the rest of life the waters of experience run sluggishly and turgidly, but in art we find them pure and distilled. What can compare with the value of this experience? What is even fit to be mentioned in the same breath with it?

I think we can shorten our discussion by granting everything that the Aestheticist claims here about the nature of the aesthetic experience and the value of the aesthetic object, except the last sentence. Aesthetic experiences are very worth-while indeed, as only those who have had them can know; perhaps they are the most worthwhile of all experiences in this neither world, but they are not the only experiences there are. Even though the skyscrapers of New York are the tallest buildings in the world, they are not the only buildings in the world, and we do have to consider the others. Aesthetic values, though far greater than most people are aware, are still just a few among many. This being the case, we can hardly behave as if the others did not exist. We must examine the relation of the aesthetic values in life to all the other values that life has to offer.

### III

So let us turn to a third possible position – not that art is the servant of morality, or that morality is the

servant of art, but that the two are co-inhabitants of the same world, each with its specific function in that world, but neither fulfilling its function in independence of the other. We must try to see what the relation is between them, and this will take us to the heart of our problem.

Morality is not, on the whole, particularly enjoyable. Moral codes are devised in order that people may be able to live in peace and security with one another. Morality is required because people often trespass upon one another's rights. As for art, it has a different role to play; it has much more to do with pleasure and enjoyment – that very which civilized life (indispensable without a certain degree of morality) makes possible. But “pleasure” and “enjoyment” are pallid words; would prefer to say that art gives us (in accordance without description of a while ago) in a highly concentrated form an experience of great richness and intensity – an experience which we may well enjoy but which may also simply move us, or prick us, or shock us, or change our whole outlook upon the world around us; it may simply please us, or it may shatter us by its power. This great potency of art is felt because art does not deal merely with a fantasy-world, it is not simply an amusement to while away an idle hour: it deals with the world of everyday experience, the same world over which morality legislates. The very experience which we treasure in art draws its significance

from the world and life outside of art. Thus already we see that they are related. We shall try now to examine some of the strands of that relation.

1. First, then, art sometimes does teach us lessons that we need to learn if life is to be nobly, or even tolerably, lived; and thus it may enter directly, at times, into the service of morality. Art can sometimes be didactic; even great art can be didactic; as Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Areopagitica* will show.

I do not wish to deny this value to art; it undoubtedly exists. Sir Philip Sidney devoted a long essay to extolling this value of art. But I fear that it is all too easy to overemphasize it; and those who place much emphasis upon it are apt to be those who do not see the other things which art is in a far better position to give us – even to morality itself. Those who praise art because it teaches or preaches or edifies by its message, or because works of art sometimes have moral or a lesson, do not speak falsely, but if this is all they have to say about the value of art for morality, they are using art for far less than it is able to give. To use a figure that Clive Bell employed in another connection, the didacticists in art are like people who use a telescope for reading the news, or who try to chop blocks with a razor. A telescope can, with some difficulty, be used for reading the news, but this is not what telescope is built for, and if they use it for this purpose alone they are using it to do jobs that far less subtle and valuable things could

do much better. High School teachers of Shakespeare who tell their pupils that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to prove that crime doesn't pay, are unwittingly putting *Macbeth* on the same level with the most ordinary cops-and-robbers movie. It is no wonder that after a year or two of literature courses taught in this way, the pupils come to hate Shakespeare for life, and would almost rather perish than approach his works again.

Art does teach us, but not by explicit preachment. As John Dewey once put it, art teaches as friends and life teach – not by preaching but simply by being. The variety of situations presented, the human characterizations, the crises and struggles and other experiences through which these characters pass, these alone, when set before us by the writer, are sufficient to produce a moral effect. Why do we need preachment as well, a moral tagged on at the end? If the tag were all that was needed, the author might have done better to write an essay or a tract instead.

2. But how then does art achieve a moral effect, if it does not state its moral? Literature, at least, does so by presenting us with characters in situations, usually situations of moral conflict or moral crisis, in which we can enrich our own moral perspectives by deliberating on their problems and conflicts, which usually have a complexity and a richness which our own moral situations seldom possess. We can learn from them, in the school

of experience, without ourselves having to undergo in our personal lives all the moral conflicts, or make the moral decisions, which they (the characters) must do; for we can view their situations with a detachment which we can seldom achieve in daily life, when we are immersed in the stream of action. And by viewing these situations and reflecting on them, we are enabled to make our own moral decisions more wisely when Life calls upon us in turn to make them.

It is difficult, for example, to see how one could read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Othello* or *Macbeth* without the exercise of his own powers of moral reflection. We see these characters in situations of moral crisis in which they must make important and often agonizing decisions; and we can hardly follow their careers without ourselves going through some of the processes of moral reflection which are required of them. And in doing this we surely grow ourselves in moral insight. It happens when we follow Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, or Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's novel or Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, to name but a few. Literature is often a stimulus to moral reflection, and one not equaled by any other, for it presents the moral situation in its total context, with nothing of relevance omitted and nothing less than this is required, of course, in making a moral decision.

3. We have already expanded our notion of the moral impact of

literature considerably beyond the rather crude didacticism with which we begin. But we can go still further. I want to bring out an aspect of art and morality that we have not yet touched upon, though perhaps it is implicit in which has already been said. The chief moral effect of art, I would like to say, lies in its unique power to stimulate and develop that most important human faculty, the imagination. This answer to the problem of the moral potency of art was given more than a hundred years ago by Shelley in his essay, "A Defense of Poesy", and it stands unchallenged to this day. Shelley said, "The imagination is the great instrument of moral good, and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the causes." Through great literature we are carried far beyond the confines of our narrow provincial world of daily life, into a world of thought and feeling more profound, more varied, than our own, and in which we can enter directly the experiences, the thoughts, and feelings, of people far removed from us in space and time, and we are enabled to share these feelings in a way that no other medium enables us to do. It is not science, but art, that engenders in us a universal human sympathy and understanding for it enables us to enter directly into the affective processes of other human beings, often with mores and cultures far different from our own. Once having lived in the world of Dostoyevsky's characters, we can no longer condemn or dismiss in toto a

large segment of humanity as foreigners or strangers who are therefore wicked or beneath us; we can no longer use the customary slogan-thinking on them and treat "Russians" or "wastrels" simply as a mass, for they live before us now as individuals, animated by the same passions as we are, facing the same conflicts, and tried in the same crucible of bitter experience. Through such an exercise of sympathetic imagination, art draws all men together in mutual respect and togetherness. Far more than preachment or moralizing, even more than descriptive and scientific discourses of psychology and sociology, art tends to unite mankind and reveals the common human nature which exists in all of us behind the facade of our divisive doctrines, political ideologies, and religious beliefs. We realize that to condemn those depicted in novels is to condemn ourselves also. And from this, if nothing else, we learn the lesson of tolerance.

This is not to say, of course, that those who read great works of literature are always tolerant or sympathetic human beings. Reading literature alone is not a cure for human ills, and people who are neurotically grasping or selfish in their private lives will hardly cease to be so as a result of reading works of literature. Still, there is an undeniable effect of a wide and serious reading of literature: people who do it, no matter what their other characteristics may be, are more understanding of other people's

conflicts, have more sympathy with their problems, can empathize more with them as human beings, than people who have never broadened their horizons by reading literature at all. No one who has read great literature widely and for a considerable period, so as to make it an integral part of his life, can any longer share the same provincialism, and be dominated by the same stupid prejudices which unfortunately seem to characterize most people most of the time.

Literature, more than anything else, is a leavening influence on the bread of morality. It loosens us from the bonds of our own position in space and time, it releases us from exclusive involvement with our struggles from day to day, it enables us to see our own local problems and trials (in Spinoza's phrase) under the aspect of eternity; we can now view it all as if from afar off, or from an enormous height. And through this exercise of the imagination, art enables us to do these things more than anything else does.

To have moral effects, it is not necessary that a work of art presents us with a system of morality, much less a true system of morality. It need not present us with any system at all; in fact its moral potency is greatest when it presents us, not with systems, but with people and situations, preferably those quite different from our own, so that through the imagination we can see our own customs and philosophies as we see theirs, as one among many of the

endless proliferations of adjustments and solutions to human problems which varying circumstances and our endlessly varied and resourceful human nature have produced.

Works of art, then, develop more than anything else the human faculty of the imagination. And, as Shelley says, the Imagination is the greatest single instrument of moral good. Perhaps this sounds like an absurd over-statement. But let us consider. Consider what morality is like without the imagination. Consider the average morality of a small community, relatively isolated from centers of culture and unacquainted with any artistic tradition. Their morality is rigid and circumscribed; the details of a person's life are hedged about with constant tiny annoyances, and everyone's life is open to the prying eyes of the others who are unfailingly quick to judge with or without evidence. Outsiders are looked upon askance; people of a different religion, a different race, or different culture are looked upon with suspicion and distrust; and anyone who does not subscribe to the last details of whatever moral code and religious belief is dominant in the particular community, is condemned and ostracized. No doubt these people are all very sincere; they are dreadfully sincere, deadly sincere, killingly sincere. That is just the trouble; sincerity without enlightenment can be as bad as intelligence without wisdom by political leaders playing around with

hydrogen bombs. These people have not known the leavening influence of art. Their morality is rigid, cramped, and arid. What is needed in their lives is not more morality and more religion – they are surfeited with that already – but the fresh breath of art. If these same people had been exposed from early youth, in the right way, to great masterpieces of human literature, and learned through them to appreciate the tremendous diversity of human mores and human beliefs that go along with the same degree of sincerity that they possess, plus the complex workings of the inner heart as portrayed by a Tolstoy or a Henry James, they surely could not find it in them to be as harsh, as intolerant, and as unyielding as they are.

Such is the nature of morality without art. Art alone may seem like a meagre influence – that we are making too much of it in the moral life. But I do not think so. I don't mean to say that if you read Shakespeare you will then go out and do good deeds for your fellowmen; the influence is not as direct as that. It is a slow steady influence, like the continuous rain that falls into the ground and all of it is absorbed; it cannot be absorbed in a few fitful cloudbursts. It leavens the whole personality, but it is not traceable to the influence of any one artist or to any one encounter with art in their lives. To illustrate this, let us try to imagine what human life today would be like without art. Imagine the world without Shakespeare, without Shelley, without Beethoven, without

Da Vinci, without any of the (say) hundred major figures of the world's art. I do not mean without just one of them – I mean without any of them. Try to think of the enormous influence which these men have made, not only on other artists, but upon the great mass of men, one generation after another, filtering down into the life of everyday humanity, even when the people themselves do not realize where the wisdom (or even just the quotations) they are using comes from. Try to imagine, I say, a world without art, and you have a scene of such barren and awful desolation and sterility that it would not be too much to say that life would hardly be worth living. At least, if I had to choose between life without any of the great works of art of the last three thousand years, and life without any of the great advances of science in that same period, I would reluctantly but unhesitatingly choose a world without science. Without modern bathrooms and finned automobiles and heated swimming pools we could still get along; but without the great art of the ages, we would surely die of poverty of the spirit.

People are far too inclined to separate art and morality into two hermetically sealed compartments. People talk as if Morality were already complete and self-sufficient without Art, and that Art, if it is to be tolerated at all, can grudgingly be admitted provided that it conforms to the moral customs of the time and place of those

judging it. But this is surely to conceive the relation between Art and Morality in far too one-sided a manner. If Art must take cognizance of Morality, then equally Morality must take cognizance of Art. Indeed, almost everything that is alive and imaginative about morality comes from the leavening influence of Art. Take our examples from Greece alone, what would morality be today without the influence of Aeschylus and Sophocles, without Socrates as described in Plato's dialogues, without even Herodotus and Thucydides with their quiet humor and gentle prodding scepticism and tolerance for other customs and other views? It is through great works of art that we get our greatest vision of the moral life itself. What is about other times and other places that we most remember? Is it their political squabbles, their wars, their economic upheavals? These are known in general to intelligent people and in detail by historians, but even then they do not usually make the dent on our personal lives that art does. What is alive today about ancient Egypt is its sculpture and its pyramids; what is alive today about the Elizabethan period, even more than the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the reign of Queen Elizabeth, is its poetic drama with its rich and vivid characterization and boundless energy. Other civilizations and other cultures may be sources of facts and theories which may fill our heads; but what makes us feel within ourselves the

same vibrant life they felt, is not their politics, not even their religion, but their art. Art alone is never out of date; science is cumulative, and the science textbooks of even ten years ago are now out of date: we study of the science of the Greek and the Elizabethans only as historical curiosities; as facts, they have long since gone out of date. It is only their art that is not dated; it can still present to us its full impact, undiminished by time. Shakespeare will never be out of date as long as human beings continue to feel love, jealously, conflict in a cruel and troubled world. It is the art of a nation that is timeless. To paraphrase a saying in the Gospels and apply it to past cultures, we can say "By their arts shall ye know them." The artists whose works we now revere may have died unsung, and most of them even if appreciated in their lifetime, were considered far less important than the latest naval victories or the accession of the current king, and yet today these things have all passed into history, but their art alone survives and stands with undiminished vigor. The art of the past moulds in countless ways the attitudes, responses, dispositions of our daily lives, including our moral ones. This is how art injects life into morality, and it is because of this that a morality that has lost contact with art is dead and sterile. And yet people tell us that Art is the slave of Morality!

#### IV

Thus far, in tracing the relation between art and morality, we have

considered the moral effects of the characters and situations upon our own moral lives, through the imagination. And perhaps this is the most important moral function of art. But it is not the only one. If it were, we would have to conclude that literature, virtually alone among the arts, has a moral effect. Indeed, some writers are convinced that this is so. And it may well be that literature has a more marked moral effect than any of the other arts, since it deals with human beings in action in a way that the other arts cannot do. Still, it is not literature alone that has relevance for morality. Let me list briefly some of the ways in which all the arts can be said to bear upon morality.

1. First, there is an effect upon the artist himself. The creation of a work of art of individuality and complexity must necessarily occupy a considerable portion of an artist's waking hours; as such, it imposes upon him a self-discipline which can well be used in other areas of his life. Even if it isn't, the self-discipline in itself is a considerable moral influence. Not only must the creative artist discipline himself in submitting his will to the difficult requirements of his artistic medium; he must also use that medium to express feelings and ideas from life – and to do this he must appreciate these values in life, whatever values he is expressing in his art. This activity, which is too easy to state but so difficult to do, must exercise upon the artist a profound moral influence.

At first this may seem to be refuted by the fact that many artists lead immoral lives. But I do not really think that this proves what it is supposed to:

a. It is true that many artists do not lead moral lives, if by morality we mean conformity to the moral codes of the local time and place. Being citizens of the universe and spectators of all mankind rather than of a particular nation or community, artists tend to ignore or even trample upon some of the moral ideas and institutions that are held sacred in their particular time and place, even though they may be exonerated in the court of morality by their descendants.

b. Besides, the charge of immorality against artists, even by standards of conventional morality, applies not to art as such but only to some individual artists, just as it probably does to some engineers and some ditch-diggers. Many people, especially those who do not have real artistic ability, like to live what they romantically think of as the life of artists while not giving society in return the works of a real artist. This bohemian kind of existence is, more than anything else, a pose – not integral to art as such but put on by certain artists or would-be artists who are greatly influenced by the Romantic tradition. "Since society won't recognize me as an artist unless I live like one, I'll live profligate life and pull my hair and in general play the role of the mad artist, and maybe they'll think I really am one" – this seems to be the formula. Now some

genuine artists such as Wagner doubtless fulfilled rather well in their own lives this ideal of the artist. But prior to the Romantic era this was not at all characteristic of artists. Think of Bach, a hard-working organist and choirmaster who lived a conventional life, almost a dull life, with his wife and large family, a solid citizen of his community, who declared with too much modesty that anyone who worked as hard as he did would be able to write music as good as his. Or think of Haydn, employed throughout most of his life in the palace of the Esterhazys, who considered himself an artisan among other artisans, in no way different from his peers except that he was playing a different trade, and who fell on his knees each morning and prayed sincerely to his Maker for strength to create fine music during the course of the day. No Romantic pose for these artists.

c. Even those who did in their personal lives embody the Romantic conception of the artist, however "immoral" they may have been in other aspects of their lives, were not so in the creation of their art. Whatever the personal life of Byron may have been like, and it was full of Romantic posturing and over-dramatization, when it came to his poetry there was not a whit of dishonesty or charlatanism about him. He labored for exactly the right words and exactly the right effects, as every true artist does, and he never allowed a line to be published if it was less perfect than he was able to make it.

In any case, when we weigh whatever immorality an artist possesses in his personal life against the great value of his work for his age and for generation to come, surely there is no doubt that the latter weighs far more heavily in the total balance. What if Wagner was unfaithful to several women, hypocritical, domineering, and generally unpleasant to live with? This occurred, but it has long since passed. Wagner was intent upon creating music whose fame and value (at least at first) were unknown and unsuspected by those who were around him; and we can only be thankful that he did compose and complete it, even if the achievement of this prodigious creative effort meant some distress to the persons around him. Those whom he injured are long since dead and gone, but his music lives in undiminished splendor.

One more word about the morality of artists. It is usual to think of artists as selfish, egotistical, demanding, and insensitive to the feelings of those around them. I have tried to show that for the most part this picture of the artists false, but even if it were always true, we could still reply: so what? Some artists are selfish and egotistical – very well, but most of the people in the world who are selfish and egotistical are not artists – in fact they contribute nothing to the world's culture or the world's productivity. They are simply selfish people, and that's all. If anybody is to be condemned, why pick on the artists?

The artists, at any rate, are adding something to the world's worth by their existence, something that far outweighs the consequences of their own personal idiosyncrasies.

Psychoanalysts tell us that artists are products of undigested infantile conflicts having to do with exhibitionism, voyeurism, and misdirected libido. This may well be so. But even if certain emotional and temperamental character-traits that we may consider undesirable occur in artists more frequently than they do in ordinary people, it does not follow that the undesirable character-traits occur because they are artists. This is a popular superstition which we should do everything in our power to squelch. The truth is rather that their being artists and their having certain temperamental characteristics (which are held, at any rate, to be undesirable by the uncreative middleclass) are both effects of a common cause, namely certain unconscious predilections which were developed in the first two or three years in their lives. It is not true that their emotional instability and other personal characteristics were caused by their being artists. If they were, then if these people ceased to be artists they would no longer be selfish, emotionally unstable, and soon. But this of course is not true. If they stopped writing or painting or composing, they would still have the same character-traits as before, only now they would have no works of art to show the world to compensate for

the traits of character which are found so annoying to some of the people around them.

2. So much for the morality of artists. We should also mention the moral effects of art upon the secondary artist, that is, not the original creator of the work but the performer. There was a violin teacher I knew as a child who told his pupil, "Keep up your violin playing, no matter what else you do, it is the best moral influence you could have." Perhaps he was exaggerating; certainly very few people who undertake the violin do so in order to improve their morality. Still the music teacher was not quite talking up his sleeve. The moral influence may have been subtle, and a sociologist compiling statistics on the student's subsequent moral life might have been quite unable to distinguish him from non-musical performers in the number of times he violated one of the Ten Commandments. Yet I am sure that a moral influence was there, subtle but pervasive; and that the coming to grips with the works of creative genius, together with the constant training and discipline required to master and perform expressively the works of that genius, cannot be without effects upon the subsequent temper of his existence ("the fibers on his soul") which in a broad sense, can be called moral. At least, it is the doing of what is both difficult to do and greatly worth-doing – and this can hardly help having some effects.

3. So much for the moral effects of art upon the creating artist and upon the performing artist. Now what about its effects upon the consumer, the person who reads or listens to or views the work of art, and for whom it was created in the first place?

Historically the most famous theory about the moral effect of art upon the audience is Aristotle's Theory of Catharsis. According to Aristotle, tragedy in particular – though it has often been extended to art in general – acts as an emotional cathartic, a purgation of the emotions. Specifically, certain emotions – which need not be limited to Aristotle's examples of pity and fear – are generated during the course of daily life which we would be better off without and which we should try therefore to expel from our system. Art is the principal agency that helps us to do this. By witnessing a powerful drama or reading a novel or hearing a symphony, we can work off these emotions instead of letting them fester inside of us or taking them out in unpleasant ways on our fellow men."Music hath charms to ease the jaded soul" – especially the soul that is so full of pent-up inner disturbances that it must find some channel for their release. Art effects this release, and herein lies a moral value – not the positive production of anything, but the negative value of siphoning off undesirable inner states and working them off innocently through the experience of art, rather than letting

them grow rancid within us or venting them destructively on our families or friends.

As it stands, this view is undoubtedly somewhat crude, especially in the light of modern psychology. We are offering a picture or model of the psyche as a vessel containing an accumulating quantity of liquids which must be drained off if there is not to be an increasing inner turmoil or even an explosion. And undoubtedly the psyche is not a vessel of liquid, and the parallel between emotions and liquids is far from complete. Yet at the same time it is, I think, considerable – notice how far Freudian theory carries out the analogy between emotions and liquids.

We may wish to argue at points with details of the Aristotelian theory of Catharsis. Yet, somewhat restated, I am sure there is something in it. Perhaps we do not work off specifically the emotions of pity and fear when we witness a tragedy; at least, to students who have witnessed many tragedies the Aristotelian theory usually comes as something of a surprise. But let us make the view a bit more general. The experience of reading, viewing, listening to a work of art does give a peculiar relief, a release, a feeling of freedom from inner turbulence and disturbance. It is no accident that many people find surcease in listening to music when they are troubled in spirit. The mere act of plunging ourselves, for a few hours, into an entirely different world when we go to see a

play, is often enough to help heal our wounds, to renew our spirits and give us a new lease on life. It is not merely that for a few hours we can forget all our troubles: this is true, but any form of entertainment however worthless, can do this; and in any case alcohol helps many people to do it too. No, the cathartic effect of art is more than this; it does not merely provide a break or interruption in the course of our worried lives, at the end of which they are exactly what they were before – or worse than before, in the case of alcohol. It is that through the aesthetic process itself, in the very act of concentrating our energies on an art-object of unity and complexity, our spiritual state is improved; there is a release from tension, an inner calm, a kind of inner clarification, that was not present before. Professor Monroe Beardsley describes it as follows:

“Suppose you are in a restless frame of mind, faced by several obligations that all seem to demand attention, but no one of which predominates to give you a singleness of purpose. Sometimes, under these circumstances, you may read a story, or fall into the contemplation of a picture, or hear a piece of music, and after a while, when you go back to your problem, you may find yourself in a very different state of mind, clearer and more decisive. This is the exhilaration, the tonic effect, of art.” (*Aesthetics*, p. 574)

We may extend this concept even further. Taking our cue from William James' essay “The Moral Equivalent

of War”, we can say that human beings harbor within themselves many hostile and aggressive impulses which, if not permitted some release, will lead to destructive activity against other human beings, often in the form of the mass aggression we call war. Now there are some things, but unfortunately a very limited number of them, which enable us to work off those natural impulses of aggression in ways that do not mean distress or destruction to others. One of them is the excitement of the hunt – and in the hunting and fishing stage of man's development, when man's very life depended on the outcome of the chase, this channel for release of energy was probably sufficient. But this source of release is not open to most of us now in the state which we euphemistically call civilization, save only occasionally on a vacation or along weekend away from the office, when we can set out for the woods and hunt down the innocent creatures of the forest for sport. But most people most of the time must find some other outlet. Competition is one – in sports, in industry, in the professions. This often provides real release, but when unsuccessful it may only increase further the course of our frustrations. The most promising outlet lies in creative endeavor – creative activity particularly in the sciences and the arts. Even if our paintings are not very good paintings, they may provide great personal satisfaction. And since it is not competitive, and since it does not carry

with it high financial stakes and since we can do it to suit our own mood and proceed with it at our own pace, it is not frustrating in the way that business competition may be. Here, then, is one “moral equivalent of war”.

4. But perhaps we have bled Aristotle's Theory of Catharsis long enough. In any event, it is not the only moral effect of art. Here is another. Imagine what life would be like if we could constantly be surrounded by beautiful buildings, beautiful streets and avenues of trees, and have our houses filled with beautiful works of furniture and china. Would this not provide a moral uplift to help lighten our daily burdens and see us through many trying situations that confront us from day to day? It would certainly be a moral tonic. The greater part of our daily environment, at least in the city, is just the opposite of the aesthetic ideal just sketched. And what is the result of this? We are more irritable, more borne down by the daily burden of cheerless chores, than we would be if we lived in an environment that was aesthetically pleasing. The presence of pleasant shapes arid colors and sounds, in and of themselves, help to soothe and smooth our personalities in such a way that we are better prepared for the daily round of practical activities with which we all have to be more or less continuously concerned.

5. Along the same lines, the experience of giving ourselves to an aesthetic object itself has a moral

effect. If we are really concentrating on the details of a work of art, and not just passively letting it play upon our senses, this effect, the heightening of our sensibilities, of refining our capacities for perceptual discrimination, making us more receptive to the world around us, is again a moral effect in the broad sense; it heightens the tone of our daily lives and helps to make the experience of the world we live in richer than it was before.

Most of what passes for the aesthetic appreciation does not begin to do this; but this is only because it is not aesthetic at all—it is a kind of tired reverie rather than an intense absorption in the aesthetic object. Hanslick said that most people, when they hear music, simply allow themselves to be inundated by the sheer flow of sound. Many people automatically turn on the radio as soon as they enter their rooms – not that they ever really listen to the music, but it is there as a background, soothing the mind possibly warding off the horrifying experience of being alone with themselves. For most people, music is simply a soothing background. They do not really listen to it, they are not even aware of even the most elementary kinds of ebb and flow that take place within it; they passively receive it instead of actively participating in it. They do not listen to the music; they only use it as a springboard for indulging in an emotional debauch of their own, or a private reverie for which the music is

merely a backdrop – a reverie which has very little to do with the nature of the music itself. Beyond taking in the general mood effect, they are aware of almost nothing that takes place in the music, but only of what takes place in their own psyches. And this of course is not an aesthetic effect; it is more like an anesthetic effect. Santayana's ironic definition of music is "a drowsy reverie interrupted by nervous thrills." I am not contending that just hearing the music will have a moral effect (snakes and toads hear it too). I am saying that the aesthetic experience – which involves nothing less than a total concentration on the perceptual details of the aesthetic object – is something which, by heightening our whole consciousness, by toning up our capacity for perceptual awareness and discrimination, by helping us come alive to the beauties in the world around us, has by this very fact a strong moral effect – or at least it is, again, a moral tonic, one avenue to mental health, one toning-up of the psyche, which artists and aesthetically sensitive observers have open to them, whatever else may be their weaknesses and troubles and whatever other vicissitudes may mar or dull the course of their daily lives.

6. But perhaps we have said enough about the instrumental values of art – that is, the good things toward which the appreciation of art is an effective instrument. Aesthetic experience is, first and foremost, not an instrumental

value at all, but an intrinsic value. Most of the things we value in life are valuable not in themselves but only for other things that we can get by means of them; so it is with money, with fame and fortune, even with morality itself – for morality is primarily an instrument for the promotion of a happier society. But the value of aesthetic experience is different from most other values in that it is not instrumental but intrinsic. Art provides us with experiences which, whether or not they have further consequences in our daily lives (and as we have just analyzed in detail, they do), are intrinsically valuable – worth having for their own sake, quite apart from the results they may lead to or the goal they may enable us to attain. Like jewels they shine by their own light; they do not depend for their worth upon goals which they help to realize or anything whatever outside themselves to give them value. In all our talk about the moral effects of art; let us not forget that moral values; whether crude or subtle, whether incidental or integral to art, are instrumental values. And in this respect, art goes morality one better: it is not merely instrumental to the achievement of things which are intrinsically worth attaining, it is itself (or the experience it provides) something of intrinsic worth – perhaps the most intense, concentrated, and worthwhile of all the intrinsically worthwhile things that exist in this workaday world.

## V

We have examined how, in some detail, the positive ways in which aesthetic and moral values are interrelated. But now, in conclusion, I want to examine one final problem concerning the relation between art and morality; what happens when aesthetic values and moral values clash? Granted that the two are related and tend to vitalize one another, may there not be times when the one is absent and the other is nevertheless present in high degree, or when the promotion of the one means (to some extent at least) the destruction of the other? The usual view is that in such cases the work of art should be suppressed or censored. Is this conclusion justified? Let us take some sample cases:

Case 1: For years James Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned in the United States until, in a famous court decision, Judge Wolsey admitted the book saying that in spite of certain passages the predominant intent was not in any way pornographic and that the book, being primarily an aesthetic object intended for a comparatively small number of sophisticated readers, would work no ill moral effects. However, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (in the unpurgated edition) continued to be banned in this country until recently (it is still banned from the mails).

Case 2: In Los Angeles, a few years ago, police raided a performance of Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*, demanding the arrest of the author.

Case 3: F. J. Mather in his book *Concerning Beauty* cites the case of a male student in his elementary art class who complained to him about the erotic quality of the female nudes in some of Botticelli's paintings. The professor smiled and told the student that he'd just better get used to it.

Case 4: When the French motion picture *Rififi* was shown in Mexico City, it had to be withdrawn by local authorities because there were so many cases of attempted robbery, copied after the robbery scene which takes up almost one-third of the picture. In Paris, however, the showing of the movie had no such bad effects: the Paris police said that by the time the movie appeared this method of robbing department stores was already out of date.

Case 5: Large numbers of adolescent thugs have been asked by the authorities after their capture where they got the ideas for the crimes they committed, and some of them cited certain television programs and comic books (mostly the latter) in which crimes exactly like these were planned down to the last gruesome detail.

Well, these are a few examples; they could be multiplied indefinitely. Now, what are we to say about them? Should the works in question be banned or censored because they affect some people in a morally adverse way? Or should they be permitted to continue, accompanied by severe tongue-lashings and moral exhortations and expressions of righteous indignation on our part? Or should we simply ignore the conflict

entirely and let the aesthetic object proceed on its uncensored way?

I cannot attempt here to examine each individual case of censorship to see whether it is justified; for this we would have to examine a great many more details of each individual situation than we can do here. All I can hope to do is to present a few principles and observations which may help to guide our thinking in this important matter.

The first point I want to make is that it is hard for me to conceive of any really worth-while aesthetic object, certainly any great work of art, as being morally objectionable enough to ban, if one approaches it in the right way – and I mean by 'the right way' the aesthetic way, which is the way the artist intended his work to be taken. If one views the work of art aesthetically, with his full powers of concentration directed upon the work of art to reveal its aesthetically rewarding characteristics, this task already requires so much attention that it tends to cut off all undesirable side-effects. If one views Joyce's *Ulysses* as the work of art that it undoubtedly is, the four-letter words and the passages some readers find indelicate if not indecent shade into insignificance; they are absorbed at once into the total organic unity of the work of art; and even the severest critic of *Ulysses* could not honestly say that the work taken as a whole is morally objectionable. The same is doubtless true of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Indeed, there are passages in the

Bible which could be taken as far more objectionable than any part of these novels – and if these portions of the Bible were to be sent to a publisher today in manuscript form, there are many publishers who would deny them publication for fear of outraging the moral sensibilities of the public.

A great work of art, simply because it does give us an aesthetic experience is practically immune from adverse moral effects; its aesthetic power tends to paralyse any incipient 'immoral' tendencies. The aesthetic way of approaching a work of art is incompatible with wholesale practical effects, such as going out and committing immoral deeds or setting out to change the world. When someone objects on moral grounds to an admittedly fine work of art, one usually finds that the person is not approaching the work in anything like an aesthetic way – he is using it for some other, and alien, purpose.

The best example that comes of mind of an admittedly great work of art being objected to on moral grounds, not be an ignorant yokel or even an aesthetically sensitive untrained person, but by a person of great aesthetic sensitivity, in fact a professional literary critic and aesthetician, is the attack on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* by Professor W. K. Wimsatt. His charge is that this play celebrates voluptuousness and sensuous abandon. Here is a bit of his description:

"What is celebrated in *Antony and Cleopatra* is the passionate surrender

of an illicit love, the victory of this love over the practical, political, and moral concerns, and the final superiority of the suicide lovers over circumstances ... There is no escaping the fact that the poetic splendor of this play, and in particular of its concluding scenes, is something which exists in closest juncture with the acts of suicide and with the whole glorified story of passion. The poetic values are strictly dependent – if not upon the immorality as such – yet upon the immoral acts. Even though, or rather because, the play pleads for certain evil choices, it presents these choices in all their nature interest and capacity to arouse human sympathy." (From his essay "Poetry and Moral", in *Thought*, pp. 281-299. Reprinted in Vivas and Krieger, *The Problems of Aesthetics*, the above passage on pp. 541-2)

Now, one might question at length this interpretation of Shakespeare's drama. But let us leave Wimsatt's interpretation unquestioned, and ask, supposing that it is correct, would this justify us in banning or censoring the play? And I think the answer is surely No. I cannot reply in this case, as one could in most of the others, that the person in question is insensitive to the aesthetic values in the play or is approaching it in a non-aesthetic way. But I can adopt another line of defense: I can say that until there is some evidence that the play actually has (or has had) an undesirable moral effect on a considerable body of readers (such as causing them to do likewise), I can see no reason whatever

for depriving mankind of a supremely valuable object of aesthetic experience. For where is there evidence that people who read the play will behave like the two lovers because they read the play to in any other way be demoralized thereby? On the contrary, if they read the play right, they will not be minus any moral stature – in fact the play is, at the very least, another example of a complex moral situation which they can reflect on – and they will be plus the aesthetic experience of a great drama to which they can return again for scenes of acute characterization, dramatic splendor, and poetry which is among the most sublime in our language. And this aesthetic experience is (as we have already tried to show) something of intrinsic value. To ban this play, then, would be to deprive ourselves of a source of intrinsic value and not to gain an instrumental value – a very bad deal indeed.

I am inclined to think that this is true in general, though not always as clearly so as in the *Antony and Cleopatra* case. We are told, for example, that American youth has been demoralized by such writers as Hemingway and Faulkner, and that although these men are excellent writers their views of life are demoralizing and they have set a bad example to the young. But I see no evidence of this. (1) To say that Hemingway or Faulkner or James Joyce or even Shakespeare is capable of demoralizing a generation of human beings is to attribute to these writers far too great a direct moral (or

immoral) influence. How can they have demoralized our youth when very few of our youth, comparatively, have even read them, and most American youth have never even heard of them? Art has moral potency, but not, I think, that much. (2) Even among the intellectualist few who do read serious literature these days, I cannot see any harmful effects. What I do see is that they are better off, yes even morally, for having read the works of these writers; their horizons have been expanded to include other views of life than those they have previously known, and this acquaintance has been brought about through works of fine writing, sometimes even splendid writing, which they would do well to emulate; and which should have given them, in the reading of it, experiences well worth having for their own sake. And finally I must add, parenthetically, that those who are incited to lives of sensuous abandon by reading Hemingway or Faulkner must have been very much inclined in that direction to begin with – else the reading of a few novels could hardly have triggered off such a great response.

Again, it is said that novels of crime and detection should be censored because reading them may cause people to commit murders and thefts themselves. Again I can see that this might have been the case, but I can see no evidence that it is the case. People whose favorite bedtime reading is mystery or detective novels are, on

the whole, extremely law-abiding people, who are in no way incited to commit robberies or murders no matter how many of them they read about in Agatha Christie or Mickey Spillane. In fact, if anything, the shoe is on the other foot: the reading of these things probably helps the reader to work off any aggressive tendencies he may have to begin with; it helps to discharge innocently, in the experience of the novel itself. Any tendencies which might, if unreleased have become dangerous. Here we may put Aristotle's theory of Catharsis to good use against those who say that art is morally dangerous.

It would seem, then, that no case at all can be made for the censorship or suppression of works of art. But let us consider two factors which we have not yet mentioned: (1) there are many works which may have bad moral effects, which can hardly be called works of art at all, no matter how generously we try to extend the use of this term; and (2) even great works of art, though not morally harmful, if taken in the right way are often not taken in the right way.

Thus, our elementary art student, though he was confronted with great works of painting, was not concentrating on them in an aesthetic manner, and perhaps at that time he was unable to do so. But in time he would, and the professor's advice was probably wise: "You'll just have to get used to it." But the professor might have gone on to tell the student what

he should look for in the painting, and by the time the student succeeded in doing this he would find that what bothered him initially no longer played any part in his response to the total aesthetic object.

In the case of the Botticelli, this is easy; but perhaps it isn't always. No matter how great something is, it can always be misused by other people who have little appreciation for its true source of value and no conception of what the world can give them. There is nothing so wonderful in the world that it cannot be used, misused, and abused by other people who are alien or hostile in spirit and who will not or cannot seek in it the values which it has to give, but will attempt to eke out of it other, and wholly foreign, values (or disvalues) instead. This is unfortunate, but it is a fact; and it remains a possibility that we have to censor certain works because there exist in large number people who will always persist in doing bad things to good works of art. At least this is so in principle, whether or not there are ever actually cases in which the evil accruing from misinterpretation and distortion far outweighs the good (both instrumental and intrinsic) that the work of art is capable of perpetuating if it continues to enjoy public and uncensored perusal.

That is one factor; but the other, and far more important, is that most of the works from which people get their alleged cue to immorality are not works of any aesthetic value at all.

Consider the case of the hoodlums who imitate the acts of crime they see pictured in comic books. Here there is not even the pretense of aesthetic value to compensate for the undesirable moral effects. And for my part, I would experience not a tremor of regret in seeing every existing comic book thrown into the trash heap—good riddance of bad rubbish. If youngsters can't read anything better than that, they might as well not read at all.

There are, then, times and places in which it would be much better if certain works (though usually these are not works of art) did not exist or were not shown. Should we say, therefore, that they should be censored? But this does not follow. It is one thing to say that something is bad in its influence on some people or even on everybody; it is quite another thing to say that therefore it should be banned or censored. It is one thing to know that the influence of something is undesirable, that certain people would be better off without it, and even to advise or preach against its being read or heard or seen; but to forcibly prevent someone from reading or hearing or seeing the work in question is to play God with other people's lives. Shouldn't they be free to make up their own minds whether they should see or read it nor not? How can a person's character ever develop if he is not permitted to make his OWN decisions, for better or for worse, but must have them made by others while

they yet affect his life? If a movie or novel is banned before I get to see it, I do not know from personal experience what it is that I am not permitted to see; I only know that a group of other people have by their action prevented me from making the choice myself — and I do not even know whether their choice was a good one, or that the novel or movie in question would have influenced mine for the worse. I am supposed to take someone else's word for it; and the assumption underlying this is that I am so weak as to be unable to make the decision for myself. Indeed, the assumption is that the censors are better able to make it than I am; and how does either the censor or I know that this assumption is correct? The censors themselves, after all, are not gods; they are finite and fallible human beings just as I am. When censorship occurs, one body of human beings is sitting in judgment over another body of human beings, telling them what they may and may not read or see. And who are they to tell me what I shall or shall not see? What guarantee is there that they are worthy to do this? And even if they are, is not every such act of censorship a loss to my own freedom? Perhaps I would be better off for not reading the book, but is it not better for me to take that chance, than to have the opportunity to exercise my own freedom of choice to be taken away from me without even so much as my consent? Viewed in this way, every act of censorship is

an immoral act, involving some people who sit in judgment upon others and so not permit other people to exercise their own human power of choice. The good that is achieved by some people not reading certain books is now counter-balanced by the evil involved in dictatorship — in one human being or group of human beings refusing to permit other human beings to make choices for themselves.

This last evil is so great that I am tempted to believe that, for this reason alone, the evils of censorship always outweigh the benefit. However, I do not want to assert this dogmatically for all the cases that might ever arise: there may be cases in which the people affected are extremely immature and unable to make wise choices, and in which there is an undeniable "clear and present danger" to morals in permitting the reading or showing of the works in question, so that even the great evil involved in censorship is more than off-set by the evil resulting from the public availability of the product. I am not convinced that such cases exist, but I do not deny that they may. But human nature must be a weaker thing than I am inclined to think it is, if such a procedure is ever justified on a large scale. If someone is a mouse rather than a human being, I would rather see this shown by his own behavior than to see him prevented by the edict of others from exercising the choice that would show what manner of creature he is. Moreover, when one work is censored, there is a much

greater chance that others will be; it is so easy to ban things at the source that the habit grows and increases like a bodily infection until it covers all of life's activities. Even if one act of censorship is justified in extreme circumstance, other acts of the same kind will follow inevitably in its train, until the rivulet becomes a river; one act of censorship, justified by extreme conditions, will lead to other acts of censorship which are not thus justified.

As for the censorship that does exist in our society, it seems to me to be wholly misplaced. We make a big fuss over a few passages from D. H. Lawrence or Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*, and it never occurs to us to condemn the tremendous output of trashy literature that does not contain objectionable four-letter words of over-descriptions of immoral acts, but does contain a cheap, oversimplified, sentimentalized, and thoroughly misleading picture of what life is like. If anything is objectionable, it seems to me that it is superficial characterizations which make people out to be far simpler than they actually are, and Pollyanna endings which give the growing child (or even the immature adult) the rosy impression that there is always a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow and that everything always comes out all right for the people who are good, and that if your heart is in the right place and you are an American you simply can't lose. This attitude, I am sure, is extremely dangerous for our society;

and it is exemplified – most of all in Hollywood movies, which unfortunately happen also to be the medium most consumed by the impressionable and aesthetically untutored. The Legion of Decency and other organizations condemn many fine motion pictures which contain a few eyebrow-raising words or amorous situations or refer to some subject which the respectable members find offensive to their pure and unsullied sensibilities; but at the same time they see nothing objectionable in the judge and endless mountains of trash that issue from the film capital of the world, which give the naive consumer of this trash the impression that the victory always goes to the man who can draw the fastest gun, that Americans always win over their enemies because they are more virtuous, that the people in the world are divided into the goodies and the baddies and it takes only a minute or two of causal acquaintance to tell which is which. Here are the harmful effects of mass media – I shall not say of art for of course this stuff isn't art; here is the stuff consumed by youngsters *ad nauseam*, and which will send them into our next world catastrophe with completely empty minds, thinking that victory is certain because We are good and They are bad, or that (on the other hand) you might as well rock and roll because the world is going to the dogs anyway and there's nothing that anybody can do about it. If anything should be censored, it is

the literature that promulgates this utterly false picture, this ignorance, this slick and oversimplified distortion of human nature and the world. But our censors are even more stupid than those who endlessly consume these hideous movies and television melodramas. They strain at the gnat and swallow the camel.

One more word about censorship. I have talked as if censorship, if imposed at all, should be imposed on morally inflammatory material dealing with sex and crime. But there is something else that is, surely, even more important: the intellectual content of works of art, the ideas they contain (and of course not all works of art do). Much as I deplore the censorship of movies and plays for the things they are now censored for, I would rather see a hundred of them banned for indecency than to see one banned because it contained new or foreign ideas which the censors found disturbing or subversive. I do not say that it should never be done, but that it should be done only under conditions of the most extreme danger, and abolished the moment the danger lessens. As we have already observed, censorship of ideas deprives us of one of our most precious freedoms, the freedom to make up our own minds and arrive at our own decisions, even if in doing so we make mistakes. This freedom of decision is vitally necessary in a democracy. In this connection, I can do no better than to remind you of one of the famous passages in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*:

“If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind ... To call my proposition certain, while there is anyone who would deny it if permitted, but who is not permitted, is to assume that we ourselves and those who agree with us, are the judges of certainty and (are fit to be) judges without hearing the other side.” (Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter 2)

And this is true even if the idea that is squelched is false. For how are we to know whether it is false if it is never permitted to be freely and openly discussed? How are we expected to know that Soviet Communism is bad if as some have suggested, we should not permit such views to be discussed in our colleges and universities? If an idea is false, then a free and open discussion in the full light of day should reveal this fact. If it is false, we should not be afraid to discuss it openly, to discover its falsehood for ourselves and expose the reasons for it publicly but if the powers-that-be simply say that it is false and then clamp the lid on it, then we have reason to be auspicious that perhaps the view is true after all and it is only to their interest to make us believe that it is false.

Besides, true views are appreciated only when they are contrasted with false ones; a false view is eminently worth discussing, and of having

sincere proponents, so that we can discover and appreciate a new in every generation the worth of a true view. Once a view, however true, is taken for granted, people come to give only lip-service to it, and no longer appreciate it as did those who fought to preserve it. This is what has happened to democracy in our day: it was a living thing to Washington and Jefferson, but it is so taken for granted by 99 percent of our population now that we are not even concerned to defend its tenets rationally against opposing views which we believe to be false.

And what if the idea or view that is being suppressed is true? Then, even more, mankind is being deprived of something of inestimable value, perhaps for generations. Generations later, perhaps, the same truth will be rediscovered by someone, and not be banned or censored the second time, but meanwhile mankind will have been deprived of something that may be vitally important to its progress or welfare. Unfortunately there is nothing about truth per se that makes it come out triumphant, and countless times in the history of the world the ruling powers have kept truths from the people and thereby cheated not only their people but generations of posterity. Even where the political power permits the truth, if the people are allowed to remain in ignorance or somnolence, or are so fearful to public opinion that they dare not openly defy it, the truth may once again be caused to die.

Never in the history of the world were we more in danger from this source than now. We live in a dream of indifference, and a tyranny of public opinion. And while we sit at our television sets absorbed in the latest escapist melodrama, systems of thought are arising around us in the world which, if they could, would impose on our freedom of thought the total suppression of a police state. The worst feature of such a system would not be its autocracy – Italy during the Renaissance was ruled by a series of autocrats who left considerable freedom of private life and creativity to the people. Even worse than this autocracy would be the rigorous suppression of all ideas opposed to the regime, through brain-washing and other techniques which are now being so thoroughly perfected that if the regime triumphed there would be no way of opposing it, for it could soon stamp out all opposition, even in thought. All works of the mind, including all works of art, which failed to conform to these ideas would be mercilessly suppressed, and all its proponents exterminated or psychologically conditioned into a passive acceptance of the ideas of the regime. In the light of such a threat, it is all the more essential that we be constantly sensitive to new and different ideas, subjecting them (whether true or false) to the fierce light of open and public discussion. If we do not do this, if we continue in our lassitude, then history may still write on the tombstone of our once-great nation. “Here lies a government that was of the cattle, for the cattle, and by the cattle, and therefore it perished from the earth.”

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– **John Hospers** was an American philosopher and political activist. He was interested in Objectivism. In 1972, he became the first presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party, and was the only minor party candidate to receive an electoral vote in that year’s US presidential election. His books include *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (1946), *Introductory Readings in Aesthetics* (1969), *Artistic Expression* (1971), *Libertarianism: A Political Philosophy for Tomorrow* (1971), *Understanding the Arts* (1982), *Law and the Market* (1985), *Human Conduct: Problems of Ethics* (1961), *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* (1953). He was editor of three anthologies, and contributed to books edited by others. He wrote more than 100 articles in various scholarly and popular journals. Hospers was editor of *The Personalist* (1968-1982) and *The Monist* (1982-1992).

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