



Toward a Philosophy of Art

My intention here, however, is not to review Shapiro's book. Rather, I wish to say a couple of things about the relationship between art and politics that he, among legions of others, addresses.

The first thing of which to take note is that while those on the Right incessantly (and understandably) bemoan the injection of leftist "politics" into the arts, it is really leftist *morality* that is the object of their disdain. "Politics" is a term loaded with negative connotations. This explains why politicians charge their rivals with "playing politics," or why we complain that this situation or that is "*all* political." "Politics" has gotten a bad rap, I believe, but that is grist for another mill. The point here is that while it is a much easier sell to accuse one's opponents of *politicizing* matters than to accuse them of *moralizing* them, political causes *are* moral causes.



Second, since it is leftist morality of which those on the Right want to divest the arts, it is unclear exactly what it is they are saying. To put it another way, they appear to be simultaneously advocating two mutually contradictory positions: the arts should *and* should *not* promote morality. Nationally syndicated radio talk-show host and Fox News contributor [Laura Ingraham](#) is about as perfect an illustration of this tendency as any of which I am aware. The title of her book, [Shut Up and Sing](#), readily reveals her call for a morally neutral art world. At the same time, though, Ingraham also urges Hollywood to provide consumers with products that embody "family-friendly" messaging — i.e. "traditional" or "conservative" morality.

[The relationship between art and morality](#) has always been a subject of interest for philosophers. That the arts contribute powerfully to the formation of character is a proposition that few could coherently deny. It is precisely our recognition of this fact that motivates parents to regulate the images that their children ingest, and both parents and non-parents alike to repudiate those parents who fail in this regard. Similarly doubtless is the fact that for as long as they have existed, artists have sought to advance their conceptions of morality through their work. At no time has this been truer than today.

Yet to concede all of this should not be confused with conceding that art and morality are one and the same. It seems to me that if "art" is a concept with any intelligibility whatsoever — and we all appear to be in agreement that it is — then we have no choice but to acknowledge the *illegitimacy* of reducing art to morality. Art and morality are indeed distinct activities; neither should be measured in terms of the other.

The [moral philosopher](#) or the ethicist and [the philosopher of art](#) or the aesthetician center attention



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on July 15, 2011

upon fundamentally different kinds of objects. The moral philosopher examines the concepts that constitute morality: “ought,” “right,” “wrong,” “duty,” “obligation,” “virtue,” “vice,” “happiness,” “pleasure,” “pain,” etc. The philosopher of art, in contrast, focuses on such concepts as “beauty,” “mimesis,” “emotion,” “representation,” “symmetry,” and “expression.”

Of moral agents and their actions it is proper — it is expected — that we should express approval or disapproval. More specifically, agents and their actions are to be praised or blamed, rewarded or punished. Artworks, on the other hand, *considered solely as artworks*, elicit no such responses. Artworks are neither “right” nor “wrong,” and the artist is neither “virtuous” nor “vicious.” Far from inviting endorsement or reproach, an artwork provokes what we may call *contemplative enjoyment*.

The response to an artwork is *enjoyment* because, like all other forms of enjoyment, an observer’s relationship to an artwork is an *activity*, not a momentary *emotion*. Enjoyment is not synonymous with *pleasure*. Enjoyment can be and not infrequently *is* derived from activities that are productive of pleasure *and* pain alike. “No pain, no gain,” an expression with which weightlifters have long been familiar, is a standing testament to this truth, for in spite of the cost in pain that the activity of weightlifting incurs, the weightlifter persists because he enjoys it. And what is true of weightlifting is no less true of all manner of activity, from sports to music, writing to teaching, parenting to marriage.

Yet the enjoyment that an artwork produces, unlike that to be had from the pursuit of these other objects, is also *contemplative*, for an artwork is uniquely situated to arrest our daily activity just long enough for us to reflect upon something that is beyond the world of wanting and getting, truth and falsity, right and wrong. A fine artwork accepts nothing less than the observer’s undivided attention. It is not, however, ungrateful, for in exchange for the abandonment of all other considerations — considerations of right and wrong, say, or scientific or historical accuracy — it promises its own unique enjoyment.

Anyone calling into question this (admittedly sketchy) theory of art would do himself a good turn to consider our reaction to, say, [The Godfather](#). Although this story has, with all of the justice in the world, been criticized for its romantic depiction of organized crime, that it is a stellar artwork is all but beyond dispute. That Mafioso aren’t “really” as educated, articulate, or successful at eluding capture as Michael Corleone is neither here nor there as far the merits of *The Godfather* as an artwork are concerned. What makes *The Godfather* an artwork is its potential to provoke contemplative enjoyment in those who behold it. And what makes it a masterpiece is that it has succeeded in not only actualizing this potentiality, but in doing so excellently.

There is much more that can and should be said on this subject. Because “the politicization of art” has been and remains an issue for those on both sides of the political divide, my objective here was simply to encourage more thought on the nature of art and its relationship to morality. It was toward this end that I offered this preliminary analysis of art.



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