

5-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Santandreu, Peter (2011) "Some Thoughts on the Relation of Aesthetics and Ethics: A Possible Christian Perspective," *Verbum*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol8/iss2/3>

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Some Thoughts on the Relation of Aesthetics and Ethics: A Possible Christian Perspective

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"One of, if not the, major questions that I have been working on recently is the relation between aesthetics and ethics. In question form, it reads something like this: Can, and if so to what extent, aesthetics be said to be ethically evaluated or ethically informative? In some sense this question has been on the table (at least in the west) since the time of Plato. Such a question is not an easy one to answer given various factors that must be taken into account. For my purpose here, I wish only to offer what I believe to be the most convincing Christian answer to this ongoing debate. I will argue that Christianity is, at its core, a religion of ethical action (praxis). Christianity also requires a life commitment. If one is to be a Christian, s/he accepts a life that strives toward the full integration of Christ in her/his day to day dealings with the world. Such a take on Christian life is what Paul described when he said, "...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). I will close by allowing the aforementioned discussion to guide our thinking about the relation of aesthetics and ethics. This will provide us with the answer that I find most convincing for a committed follower of Christ. Due to time and length restrictions I will not be able to go into the depth that some of these points deserve. This will therefore be a brief presentation of what I view as the Christian answer to ethical evaluation of the aesthetic and aesthetics usefulness for ethics."



Peter Santandreu

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One of, if not the, major questions that I have been working on recently is the relation between aesthetics and ethics. In question form, it reads something like this: Can, and if so to what extent, aesthetics be said to be ethically evaluated or ethically informative? In some sense this question has been on the table (at least in the west) since the time of Plato. Such a question is not an easy one to answer given various factors that must be taken into account. For my purpose here, I wish only to offer what I believe to be the most convincing Christian answer to this ongoing debate. I will argue that Christianity is, at its core, a religion of ethical action (praxis). Christianity also requires a life commitment. If one is to be a Christian, s/he accepts a life that strives toward the full integration of Christ in her/his day to day dealings with the world. Such a take on Christian life is what Paul described when he said, "...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). I will close by allowing the aforementioned discussion to guide our thinking about the relation of aesthetics and ethics. This will provide us with the answer that I find most convincing for a committed follower of Christ. Due to time and length restrictions I will not be able to go into the depth that some of these points deserve. This will therefore be a brief presentation of what I view as the Christian answer to ethical evaluation of the aesthetic and aesthetics usefulness for ethics.

To begin it is important to clarify the terms we are working with. We understand "aesthetics" to be the study of the attractive or the affective in both human made artifacts and natural landscapes or occurrences. Aesthetics comes from the Greek word *αισθητικός* which is translated as "perception" or "feeling." The word, and subsequent field of philosophy that bears its name, only came to use in the 18th century with A.G. Baumgarten.³⁸ The archetypal figure in the development of aesthetics, however, wrote fifty five years later. Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Judgment* introduced the idea of "disinterested pleasure" that challenged the instrumental use of the affective qualities of art for ethical ends. From this grew the tradition of *l'art pour l'art* or "art for art's sake," presenting the aesthetic as something of intrinsic value. It

³⁸ A. G. Baumgarten was the first person to use this word when talking about the affective qualities of poetry: Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's Meditationes Philosophicae de Nonnullis ad Poema Pertinentibus*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 78.

is for this reason that we are faced with our current enquiry into aesthetics' relationship with ethics.

When we come to "ethics" we are talking about systems or methodologies for individuals or communities to live by. Whether one comes down as a Utilitarian or Deontologist, it must be agreed that goal of ethics is to generate human flourishing. This being the case, it is not difficult to see why one might be interested in the question of the relation of aesthetics and ethics. If the aesthetic can be useful, why wouldn't we desire to incorporate it into a system of ethical thought? One reason why this is problematic is the historical example of propaganda. We have seen how art, especially in Nazi Germany and Cold War Russia, can be (mis-)used to advance the (oppressive) rule of a political body. For this reason, and others like it, the question of aesthetics and ethics is a complex one that will require much in-depth research and reflection to resolve in any comprehensive way. But we are not concerned with resolving this question for the world at large, only for those who call themselves Christians.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Herein lies another difficult and sticky question about affiliation and membership in a group. In answering this question it is necessary to discuss matters of orthodoxy and adherence to certain proclaimed truths about the life of Christ and his vision for the church. Although such an exploration would be no doubt fruitful, this is not the primary way this project seeks to define "Christian." For our purposes here we will only concern ourselves with the Christian call to action in the world. When I talk about a specifically Christian "call to action" I am not indicating that other world religious traditions are in any way wanting for their own "call to action." I wish only to disclose the particular importance praxis has for Christianity without any connotation of uniqueness among the vast multiplicity of religions and spiritualities. That being said, a look at the Scriptures will prove my point about the centrality of Christian praxis.

We can see from many commands to love given by Jesus in the gospels (Mt 5:43-44; 19:19; 23:37-40; Mk 12:30-33; Lk 6:27-35; Jn 13:34-35; 15:9-19 etc.) that loving the other is an important aspect of discipleship. In one such passage Jesus declares that the entirety of the law and the prophets can be summarized as: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all our soul, and with all your mind...and...you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mat 22:37-40). This love, put into the concrete form of what has come to be known as the Corporal Works of Mercy, appears as a crucial Christian attribute when we come to the latter part of Matthew's Gospel. The eschatological story of the dividing of the sheep from the goats presents us with a glimpse of Final Judgment. What is interesting about this passage (25:31-46) is that the only criterion for judgment is whether or not one has given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, and company to the sick or imprisoned. Thus the life of a Christian necessitates acts of social justice and right relation to the other in the world. For further evidence one could turn to James 2:26 where one reads, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead." The passages presented above which indicate the centrality of praxis in the Christian life are a fair cross-section of the greater gospel message.

Having established the active ethical component of Christian life one could ask, How committed does one really have to be? Is it enough for a believer to work at the soup kitchen on Saturday, put in his/her hour on Sunday and go about his/her business for the rest of the week? After all, Augustine says, "Love God and do whatever you please (*dilige et quod vis fac*)." It is not mine to say how God calls each individual to live the gospel message but it does seem to be the case that Christianity is not something one can (or should be able to) turn off and on at

his/her convenience. The Christian allows God to permeate every aspect of his/her life to the extent that no situation or experience is able to escape the question: How does *this* affect my relationship with God in Christ? If we can agree on such a definition of the Christian life, the next question is, “Does anyone actually live like this?” People who have done this in the past are known to us today as the Saints. Men and women like Francis and Clair of Assisi, Dominic, Thomas Aquinas, Jean Vianney and Thérèse of Lisieux have shown us what such a life looks like and the variety of ways it can be lived out. They provide us with the ideal virtue of loving Christian obedience and confirm for us that such lives are livable, even today (Blessed Teresa of Calcutta being a recent example).

For a slightly more thorough exploration of the actively holistic Christian life we can turn to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Known as “the Father of Existentialism,” his primary philosophical thrusts include the subject’s journey through the “spheres of existence” and necessity of Christian ethical commitment. The spheres of existence according to Kierkegaard are: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.³⁹ What is important to remember about the spheres is that they specify the main driving force in an individual’s life. The spheres do not distinguish ontologically different people but rather people whose primary concern is at a different stage of development. A brief explanation of each sphere will be beneficial. The “aesthetic” stage is one of hedonistic pleasure seeking where the individual actively avoids commitments and serious relationships. The example he gives is the libertine Don Juan who appears most famously in the opera *Don Giovanni* by Mozart. The second “ethical” stage is when the individual begins to make commitments and enter into serious relationships with others. The individual now seeks higher virtuous ideals but does so out of human reason alone; s/he has not yet reached the “religious” stage. In this last stage the individual finds that faith is the true guiding light and sometimes this goes against human reason. His famous example of this is when Abraham, led by faith beyond reason, goes up the mountain to kill Isaac (Gen 22:1-19). For Kierkegaard the last “religious” stage is where Christianity is located. With the Christian life being the last phase on a long journey, it is not something to take lightly. Rather becoming a Christian is a life commitment to be worked on at every possible moment of the individual’s existence.

In fact, when Kierkegaard lays these spheres out and wishes to discuss the Christian life, he finds that he can only do so by way of a pseudonym. Kierkegaard, being the *de facto* author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript of Philosophical Fragments*, only appears as the editor when he first published the book in 1846; Johannes Climacus is the author. This is so because Kierkegaard does not want to suggest that he has reached this state of life in such a way that he could be an authority when describing it. Climacus, on the other hand, was a seventh century monk who lived at Mt. Sinai and wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Because the progression through the spheres is so important to becoming a Christian, it is no wonder why Kierkegaard chose the name which literally means John the Climber.

Taking up now this theme of climbing, we can see that Christianity is a work in progress. In the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* we read about the faithful on earth as “pilgrims in a strange land.”⁴⁰ That being the case, the idea of a life-long journey to ever fuller Christianity is neither new nor radical. While on the journey, as we have stated earlier, it is action that must be

³⁹ For a more thorough explanation, see: Søren Kierkegaard (Johannes Climacus), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁴⁰ *Lumen Gentium* 7, 1964.

the result and catalyst of our conversion. Kierkegaard states, “I certainly do not deny that I still accept an imperative of knowledge and that through it men may be influenced, but then it must come alive in me, and this is what I now recognize as the most important of all.”⁴¹

Now that we have seen that both the centrality of Christian action and the involvement of the entire person (heart, soul and mind) are needed to embrace one’s pilgrimage to God, the original question of aesthetics and ethics is somewhat simpler to address. For the Christian, as Kierkegaard pointed out, there must be a progression toward a deep and rich relationship with God. This, for him, takes the form of ethical commitments to loving one’s neighbor. If this is the path to a saintly expression of Christian living, nothing can be exempt. It would not make sense for the Christian to divide the secular world from his/her individual Christian worldview. Discussions like this are particularly prevalent around voting time when some individuals challenge others to be more organic with their approach to the faith. The same approach can be taken when a Christian comes to an art work or other aesthetically affective experience. Since the Christian cannot section off certain aspects of life for God and others for him/herself, even one’s engagement with the aesthetic must be seen through a Christian lens. Further, if Christianity has a heavy leaning toward ethical action, it is only right to interpret aesthetic affect in ethical terms: How does this aesthetic response contribute to (or detract from) my ability to love God and my neighbor? An example will help to further clarify.

It is not unfair to say that a decent-sized portion of contemporary entertainment tends to spare no expense when it comes to erotic imagery. It is true that sex does sell. Sexuality reaches us on a very deep and intimate level. This being the case, it is all the more detrimental when sexuality is exploited. In the popular song *Move Bitch* by Ludacris featuring I-20 and Mystikal we find just such exploitation. While some of the metaphors and most of the slang is lost on me, it is apparent that the song’s chorus, “move b*tch, get out the way,” is not very edifying. In the beginning of the song it seems that the “b*tch” is another driver on the highway who happens to be in the way of the singer who, while admitting to being intoxicated, wants to go 100 mph unobstructed. Whereas the song is filled with the glorification of violence, substance abuse and is punctuated with profanity, the most troubling aspect comes toward the middle when the singer speaks about women as meager sex objects. The singer puts it this way, “The b*tches want me to f**k - true true, Hold up wait up, shorty ‘Oh wazzzupp, get my d*ck sucked, what are yoouu doin?’” The point I am trying to make here is that this affects the listener. It is not a stretch to imagine that an individual (in this case specifically a male individual) who listens to this song, while he may not originally have explicitly thought about women and sex in this light, has the potential of coming to this view. Such a criticism may not be justified if I could only provide one example, but the sad reality is that examples of songs like this are prevalent (e.g. *Choke Me, Spank Me (Pull My Hair)* by Xzibit, *Wait (The Whisper Song)* by The Ying Yang Twins, *Para Noir* by Marilyn Manson, *et cetera ad nauseam*)

Is it possible, as a Christian, not to be offended by this song? Sure it has a good beat and catchy rhythm, but can such aspects of the song be sectioned off from the whole? I would say no. From an artistic point of view, an art piece (this song included) must be taken in its entirety. There is not an artistically responsible way to dissect a song into constitutive parts and judge them individually, praising the good and condemning the bad. The point of all this is that there is always a relationship between aesthetics and ethics for Christians. The Christian does not section off pieces of life for God and the rest for oneself. This being the case, Christians should be

⁴¹ Søren Kierkegaard, “Early Journal Entries,” in *Essential Kierkegaard* eds. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

sensitive to their aesthetic input because it may negatively contribute to her/his responsibility to God and neighbor.

What I have tried to show here is that while the question of the relation of aesthetics and ethics is a difficult and complex one for non-religious people, it is more straight forward for Christians. This is because Christianity, understood as a journey to a more all-inclusive relationship between the (entire) self and the Divine, is concerned with ethical action. If the Christian is to expose him or herself to songs, images or stories that portray their neighbors as objects to be used for pleasure or personal gain, it is not a question of if, but when the Christian will begin to believe this, and act accordingly. Humans are not unaffected by what we see, hear and read. Sense perception is one of our main sources of gaining information about the world and one another. The question we can ask now is, "Why would a Christian not want to be formed in such a way that would contribute to positive ethical output?" Personally, I cannot think of an answer.

*** Prize for the second Original Essay provided by



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