

The Value of Art V.S. the Artist's Moral Character

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The debate surrounding the ethical and moral criticism of art vs the artist and whether or not the anti-empirical separation of the two is possible has been ongoing for decades. As a student and artist, I am taught to recognize the mastery of art and to acknowledge the brilliance and skill of the artist; however, it is my nature to fiercely rebuke the moral failings and egregious acts committed by these same artists. I do not seek an absolute answer; I seek a better understanding. With that, I must ask the question: Can the artists truly be separate from their art and to what extent is an artwork's ethical value influenced by the artist's moral character?

Background

In the early 20th century, the era of New Criticism prescribed an established method of literary and artistic analysis (Grady, 2019) The separation of the art vs the artist was a popular instrument used by certain New Critics, more commonly referred to as Aestheticists. In the beginning of the 20th century, the separation of art and artist was a radical concept, but it soon became the standard. The Aestheticists believed that moral and ethical criteria did not belong within the context of aesthetics in artistic analysis (Dixon, 2019).

The Artist and the Art

Emily Todd VanDerWerff (2017) states, "To demand that art and artist be kept separate is a monstrous idea, one that celebrates artists at their best and then pretends they don't have a worst." This statement resides within the constant that all art is influenced by the past, present, and future actions of the artist. The act of separating the art from the artist can be more accurately described as separating the art from the artist's morally reprehensible actions. The dangers of this separation emerge as such: Because of the understanding that moral character does directly influence the methods of creating art, the art and the artist are intrinsically linked. Not just in the case of an artist's flawed character, but in every context. This link should not be

severed only in the context of an artist's flawed character. This exception implies that the success, skill, popularity, brilliance, etc. of an artist catapults them "beyond the orbit of ordinary moral criticism." (Lang, 2019, p. 13)

The Art, not the Artist

Arnold Berleant (1977) contradicts Lang's sentiment. He notes that artists should not be more responsible for their actions than those in any other occupation (p. 3). The only influence an artist should have is that of the aesthetic value of their craft. The premise that the immoral actions of an artist is a relevant cause of depravity as it relates to the art, rather than a mere framework to be considered in the context of the art, becomes difficult to distinguish (Nannicelli, 2020, p. 229). The anti-empiricist view allows one to appreciate the solitary value of an artwork without endorsing the actions of the morally corrupt (McGonigal, 2010, p. 550). Nannicelli (2020) states, "In the context of the ethical criticism of art, there is also a context-dependence to questions about whether the moral character of the artist figures into a causal explanation of how the artwork came to be just the way it is." (p. 242). Whether or not an artwork should be appreciated in spite of the unethical actions of the artist depends on the causation and motive behind that artwork.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this debate. Judgment on this topic is equivocal and situational, but the direct aesthetic value of a work of art *can* be separate from the actions of the flawed artist. However, the quality of an artist's work *should not* justify their actions.

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