

Nature of Art as Ethical Imperative

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ABSTRACT

In addition to formal and aesthetic nature, Artwork, undoubtedly has moral qualities as well. The moral dimension in art is so important that cannot be neglected. The relationship between art and morality is the most sophisticated and complex problem in the philosophy of art. After a brief reference to the various theories of Western and Islamic thinkers about the relationship between art and morality, this study deals with the spiritual link between goodness and beauty in terms of the philosophy and mysticism. Then, it raises a discussion on the artistic education and its effects on moral education, especially about young people, and analyzes art as a method for moral growth and finally expresses the purpose of art as a moral issue, and as the task of artist as the creator of the moralist artwork. This research eventually deduces that the artistic action is an ethical action and art is itself a moral issue.

KEYWORDS: moral art, moralism in art, traditional theories of art, artistic education, moral aesthetics

1. INTRODUCTION (PROBLEM STATEMENT, OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY)

The aim of this study is to describe and explain the relationship between art and morality. It also deals with the understanding the nature of art as well as the ethical matter and finding definitions and characteristics of moral art. There is much debate about morality and art. Throughout the history of thought, some claimed that the arts is free creativity and creativity of artist and morality somehow limits the art, so art and morality traverse separate methods. On the other hand, some believe that an art is excellent which is in order to human perfection and development and in terms of them, art is inextricably linked with ethics. This study is an attempt to explore the nature and meaning of art as a moral matter and prove the assumption that art in itself is morale, regardless of selecting content outside of itself and merely as something beautiful and good and the production and creation of artwork is a moral act. The method used in this study is qualitative and descriptive - analytic and is based on aesthetic theories.

2. The theoretical foundations –position of Western and Eastern thinkers on the relationship between art and morality

Traditionally, there are two views about the relationship between art and ethics, a theory evaluates art regardless of morality and based solely on the aesthetic aspects, in contrary, there are views that evaluate constantly the works of art with moral criteria and values [1].

Plato banished poets from his state and utopia and said: "If we want the order and law to be prevailed in society, the imitator poet should not be allowed to enter the country, because he awakens inferior desires, while he disables wisdom and thought"[2]. Although Plato despises art, but he doesn't require it to follow the morality and doesn't consider an art work without moral message of no value (ibid., Pp. 2245 and 2086). Of course, Plato assumes a direct relationship between art, love and beauty and examines beauty in terms of utility. He offers a functionalist perspective and judges the artwork on the basis of profit and loss. He believes artists should bring in his work concepts that are legally competent. Aristotle also considers the art as produced special force that wisdom leads it. In general, the ancient sages consider the art related with wisdom, goodness, benefits and beauty [3]. Thus, from their perspective, art is linked with ethics.

The important tradition of criticism in the West, from Aristotle to the late nineteenth century, was based on the fact that literary works should not only be fun, but at least with educational objective [4]. Some moral philosophers and Christian theologians, such as *Bossuet* and *Nicole* and even thinkers like *Rousseau*, have strongly and explicitly condemned story writing and performing arts and accused it of poisoning and corrupting the human body and soul. Art has long been the target of choleric suspicions of moral philosophers. Some Christian ethicists consider that all forms of art have inherent immoral qualities. [5] Of course some Christian moralist theologians in the nineteenth

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century not only have not rejected the art, but also believed that types of art can be used in the moral education of youth. Bartolomé considers these oppositions due to the bias, narrow-mindedness, strict traditions, cynicism, hypocrisy as well as cultural and customary prohibitions and believes that art being moral or immoral is dependent on the intent of artist, as well as the interpretation of the audience and his pure view (Ibid., Pp. 77- 76). This claim can remind of this verse of *Hafez*:

The eyes of lewd look is far from loved ones/ look at her from a pure mirror[6].

According to *Hegel*, art is one of the ways through which man gains self-consciousness. For him, art is one of the ways of responding to the realities that he is often responsible for creating most of them and often describes the attitude of the artist[4]. So, art links the fact to truth and will be the center of the human moral experience in various ways and in any case, it is a moral issue in nature and in its essence.

Immanuel Kant distinguishes between the graceful, good and beautiful affairs, and thus separating the art and morality. Enlightenment thinkers and classics knew that art is in the service of morality and society and humanity guidance. Contrary to them, followers of *Parnas*, following *Kant* theory wanted art without purpose and intention [3]

Tolstoy knew that the moral importance of art in the community is more urgent than aesthetic values. He believed art criterion could not be the joy of art, but a humanitarian purpose is necessary for art[1]. He believes that the valuable art transfers the joy of spiritual oneness with humanity [7]. Of course, the problem of such thinking is that it cannot absolutely distinguish accurately between literary work and political rhetoric. This view which seeks the basis for artwork beauty in moral aspect is considered as extremist, but more moderate view knows that art lacks artistic value, only if it suffers from moral obscenity.

2.1 Perspective of traditionalists about art and morality

Traditionalists cannot be counted among moralists in evaluating art. An artwork is good that is well made and the artist has no obligation except to devote all his forces to build the artwork optimally. For traditionalists, art has no responsibility about moral and the advantage of artwork is its objective benefit, nor moral purpose [8]. Of course, the beneficial effect, irrespective of the fact that the profitability is satisfying moral purpose or creating mental and visual relaxation for the audience, is a moral good in both cases. A noble and great work, like a Timurid exquisite stucco altar, a Persian poem, or Safavid mosque, is considered as morale according to suitability of form, application and the theme; its beauty through its positive impact indicates safety and health, well-being and being moral.

Of course, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is one of the traditionalist theorists, says "Art is based on the knowledge of the universe that is God's creation and is sacred and spiritual in nature, and in turn is a vehicle for the transfer of knowledge with a divine nature, so morality and art have a direct relationship with one another" [9].

3. Research findings; Art as a moral imperative

3.1 The relationship between goodness and beauty

Plotinus, the ancient sage, considers beauty and goodness the same. He knows beauty and spirit mixed and knows that beauty is the true life of spirit and believes that to achieve beauty and goodness, the artist must seek his inside and no peace will be achieved and he will not see beauty unless he purifies soul of impurities and polishes it and unless he reflects in the spirit mirror. In his view, art is linked with morality and spirituality. From the perspective of some medieval thinkers, there was a strong relationship between goodness and beauty ([3].

Clive Bell, artist theorist considers art not only a means to achieve a good state of mind, but also the clearest and most effective way to do so. He says, no state of thought is found that is higher or stronger than aesthetic thought. So, effort to find a moral justification inartistic themes is futile, because art causes goodness [10].

Thinkers agreed with art and its ethical use often consider a link between goodness and beauty and good and beautiful matter. Of course, *Nietzsche* said in this regard: "It is scandal for the philosopher to say good and beauty are the same and if the truth is added to them, you can attack it, the truth is ugly"[4]. He does not explain about it and does not say whether the beauty is evil? But if we pay attention to it from a linguistic and semantic view, we would find that in Persian, especially in literature, the term "goodness" is applied in both senses of "benefaction" and "beauty". Also in the ancient Persian language, "Honar" (Art) or "Hoonar" means a good and decent man with good morals and in old poetry and literature of Islamic period, where the word art is used, it means "grace and perfection" (Loghatname.org) and was similar to moral individualities. In the mystical literature, art means virtue, perfection and humanity; for example, *Hafez* counts moral perfections in his poems in Sufism as art-against fault, when he says:

Relying on virtue and knowledge in Sufism is infidelity/if the Sufi has hundreds of arts, he should trust[6].

So in Persian, the concepts of goodness that is a moral thing is associated and corresponds with beauty and in nature is of a category. So, with a linguistic and semantic approach to art and beauty, it can be found that art in the Iranian-Islamic notion is considered in itself ethical.

Islamic scholars have spoken about the beauty and art. Farabi says in this regard: "Beauty of any living thing is that he is awarded with the highest possible existence and since the existence of the first living thing is superior creature, then his beauty will fade all beauty in his light." Muslim scholars applied art in its general sense which is strongly connected to morality. They put the human superior ethics in the category of beauty. Martyr Motahari also held a true relationship between beauty and moral good traits. He believes if man understands the beauty of moral, he will never commit a sin [3]. In other words, the beauty of spirit is the ethics and to be moral, one should learn the art of soul beautification [11]. Art, creation, or seeing a work of art itself is a tool and a way to beautify the soul and in this way, art serves as a moral issue. In Islamic visual arts, that as a result of the commitment and belief in Islamic rules, has more an abstract nature and there is an undeniable unity even in sacred places and objects as plant and geometric motifs. Application of these works of art in mosques, pulpits and altars, along with Islamic architectural art, as tiling, stucco, carving and a variety of other visual arts, according to religious content and religious use, is certainly considered as moral.

Muriss Barres knows that beauty and usefulness are related in art, believes that art work is beautiful because it is useful and the opposite is also true, i.e. the beauty can be useful due to its desirable emotional and psychological effects [5] and it should be noted that it is considered useful for fostering spirit and ethical human emotions. As noted in this case, the Iranian Islamic decorative arts are an example.

Burckhardt, traditionalist theorist of Islamic art, says, "for Muslims, art is a sign of God's existence and greatness as the extent of its beauty, like the starry sky; Islamic art reaches perfection as if independent of the artist, its perfection and fault disappear in its general character which is as if according to the nature"[12]. As we know, God repeatedly commanded Muslims and believers in the Holy Qur'an to see the land and natural signs and thought in them [13]. So observing as well as creating samples of Islamic art, as one of the revelations of God beauty, such as signs of nature, are useful in religious education and usefulness is a moral matter and here, Islamic art is related to religious ethics and Islamic education. In addition, the link between the two concepts of "Islam" and "art" should be sought in the attitude of Islam on the subject of art. Because religious attitude is essentially a life cognition attitude, always expresses some do's and don'ts. Thus, Islamic art which is based on Islamic thought is a moral issue based on do's and don'ts of Islamic beliefs.

From the perspective of Islamic scholars, the art is not only the creation of beauty (goodness) and in this regard is common with morality, but also it is the allegory of virtue (Qolami, 2008, p. 80)[14]. However, from the perspective of Islamic scholars, despite moral philosophers in the West who know that ethics is result of man socialization and his relationship with the community, moral principles and its spiritual roots are related to the inner being of man and his divine nature and creation (Nasr, 2008, p. 25)[8].

3.2 Artistic education and moral education

"The work of art is a form of expression. Good art work is full expression. The work of art is an object which is viewed from the perspective of eternity. The conjunction of art and morality is in it ... In the idea that the beautiful matter is the purpose of art, is a hidden truth. Because beautiful is what makes a man happy"(Wittgenstein, 2003, p. 50)[15].

Artistic education methods, however, don't substitute the moral education. It is definitely effective and useful in moral education. "Artistic education means growing awareness and sensitivity to the aesthetic properties of objects and phenomena" (Bennet, 1972, P29)[16]. Art and art education has various effects and the results of artistic correct education can be studied in various aspects. Artistic education and training in the field of education and discovering the creativity talents of youth is critical and can direct them towards the world of creativity and increase the joy and confidence and is effective in the maturity of child (Glienskaya, 1998, p. 8-9)[17].

Art in its purest and lasting effects, observes the profound man needs and aspirations and establishes a deep link with the most fundamental issues of human life. In different cultures and schools of thought, art has its educational role and in addition to the individual role, has very important social influences. Generally, art can have an effective role in the development of different aspects of personality and helps effectively the development of aesthetic talent, emotional development and philanthropy, strengthening imagination and creativity, boosting confidence and strengthening child moral system. Also art and creative activities provide the field for mental health of children through answering to spiritual emotions and discharging the psychological needs (Mirzabeygi, 2003, p. 73. 74 and 94. 96)[18]. All the things mentioned are in connection with the good, and thus moral imperative. So, it

can be concluded that the artistic education affects the moral education, especially in children, and dignity of artistic education due to the role of art in the realization of some educational fundamental goals.

there are different views about the qualities which are grown in the light of regarding teaching the art, but the public art education theories state that artistic education is not only effective in the development of creativity, and problem solving ability, but also enhances the investigative motivation, flexibility of thought and judgment and social development and a sense of cooperation, increasing self-confidence and self-leadership (Mehrmohammadi, 2004, 60-64; Amini, 2005, pp. 21-24)[19, 20]. Therefore, it can be said that in this case, as the artistic education is moral good due to its usefulness, in addition that the psychological development and perfection, searching spirit, good companionship and cooperation with other members of society, confidence and responsibility, which the thinkers of art education consider it as the result of artistic education are moral matters that based on experience and knowledge, they have a deep and strong tie with the art and education, and thus contribute to the characteristics and moral values of art in itself.

Art can contribute to the children moral education. Aesthetic experience and art can be effective in helping moral education, as its evident characteristic is the incorporation of knowledge with compassion and brings an understanding with deep feeling and emotion with cognition. Thus, inclusiveness and integrity of values education is guaranteed using art tools and experiencing a wide range of values and complex emotions is achievable using art media. Achieving moral perfection lies in the use of media that can represent the full range and depth of values and this is achieved using art forms (Mehrmohammadi, 2004, pp. 65-68)[19].

Art has an efficient role in religion or belief teaching in children, it can be briefly said that it has expressed doctrinal concepts in different ways, including the existence of God for children through stories, poetry and other art forms; for example using art techniques to describe the existence phenomena and beauty of creation worthy of children knowledge and linking it to the Lord, outlining excerpts from life of religious figures and showing the stories of saints as well as visualization of good deeds and bad deeds in some cases, for moral and religious education of children (Mirzabeygi, 2003, pp. 80-85)[18].

The education of children in the cultural, historical, social and political areas is the most important task of education. Because, these matters are effective in transfer of cultural heritage, understanding historical events and processes and social issues. Such training can enable children to learn social interaction and accountability and collective action. Artwork can be at service of their goals and using a variety of techniques and charm, they can pave their way in this direction. Art attractions including stories and display leads children to follow issues carefully and receive various information and concepts. As well as short films, drawings and paintings can also have a significant role in the transmission of messages; messages such as historical and social events and biography of characters and geographical features of countries and regions. In addition to the increased information, it can be effective in the intellectual, moral, emotional and social development. Simulation and children's emotional and moral influence in such cases can also have an important role in moral and social development (ibid., Pp. 84-87).

3.3 Artistic practices

Throughout history and in different societies, by experience it has been found that art affects people's behavior. Aristotle knows the influence of art in *Catharsis* (Refining emotion). According to Aristotle, we experience our safe emotions through artwork without risk and will be released and discharged from emotion-induced pressure. In summary, as the drug purifies body by ridding it of harmful mucus, a painting, tragedy and poetry purify the soul by discharging what is painful and harmful in sensual passions (quoted from: Bartolomé, 2003, p. 89)[5], this property of art is similar to what the Sufis considered for dance (Sema).

Abu Sa'id Abu-al-Kheir says: "youth sheds passion in dance and thus gets rid of its dominance (Shafi'i Kadkani, 1988, pp. 207-208)[21]. The claim links the experience of artistic observation as one of the religious rituals with journey and achieving growth and human perfection and changes it to the meta-ethics and religious-Sufism matter. Of course, purification of work of art is no longer associated with its beauty, but it is the result of artistic experience and identification with the characters of the narration and the power of imagination of the observer.

3.4 The purpose of art and artist tasks

Idealist thinkers consider the art as an attempt to achieve perfect harmony between the outer and inner affairs. So, art is considered as a moral difficult challenge (Turner, 2006, p. 24)[4]. In this case, there is also an argument that the goal of art is within it or outside of it, that is art for art or art for the social and moral matter or human matter generally. Fans of art believe that artists' works should serve the social and ethical implications and so be instructive and followers of art for art, considered it free of any content and responsibility and good and evil and spoke of the futile art. (Seyyed Hosseini, 1957, pp. 278-283) [22] It should be pointed out that these thinkers

believed in the beauty of art and knew beauty the only benefit of art, then, according to what was said previously, and given the link between beauty and goodness (good) in linguistic concepts, besides the good links and ethics, and the relationship between visual and spiritual beauty and joy, we cannot accept that from the perspective of the artists, the has been removed from the benefits and moral goodness. The artists and art experts had the greatest emphasis on form rather than content and message implicit in art and considered the artist task to mere create beautiful art and a sensual pleasure; but certainly they could not generally deny the moral and spiritual benefits of social art. While, moral thinkers considered art merely the servant of morality, and thus didn't distinct between preaching, moralizing and artwork.

Here, we should join Bartolomé who says "the task of artist, first of all is to accept this meaning that the moral laws excels the art laws. The purpose of art is the goodness of art work and aim of morality is human goodness; while the requirement for full enjoyment of human is benefiting from beauty reflected in works of art. But this is certainly not the ultimate human good (Bartolomé, 2005, p. 98)[5].

So moralism, the purpose of a work of art, is creating reactions that artwork causes with the help of showing the events in an artistic way. Expected responses to the aesthetic aspects of artwork is dependent; also presence of moral bad insinuations in a work of art is equal to its aesthetic defect (Peak, 2009, p. 182)[1]. For good and beauty are essentially two sides of a coin and moral good is contradicted with ugliness. Good matter also seems pretty, although the beauty has no aesthetic aspect; therefore, we can say that the goal of creating a work of art is embodying the link between good and beauty.

4. CONCLUSIONS

By experience, it is understood that the artwork per se has quality and moral influence. In this case, there have been different theories and criticisms. Plato undervalues the art as an imitating matter. European thinkers from Aristotle to the nineteenth century evaluated the art works based on its educational power and moral value of its contents. Later, theorists said that art should be free of any purpose outside itself and the ethical criticism does not deny the art. Even the traditionalist thinkers considered the structure based on a work of art. In this study, the moral influence of art as something beautiful, good and beneficial was investigated and it was concluded that regardless of the intentions of the artist and audience of artwork, is a moral issue according to its nature and character, per se. Because, it is not far from the moral influence. Meanwhile, art as a beautiful thing, however, is associated with goodness and is a moral imperative and ethical implications of art are associated with its artistic value as well. It should be noted that the purpose of art is not merely conveying concepts and ethical implications and preaching. Artwork is different from a speech or a scientific and ethical rhetoric. The moral effect of art is applied indirectly and through experience, along with identification and integration of sensory experience of audience with the structure and content of work. If the moral concepts of artwork are fabricated immature, and naked, far from artistic expression and rhetorical and metaphorical expression, or is offered in a poor way, the possibility to achieve the moral effect on the audience will be very low. However, generally speaking, the action of artist to create a work of art as something beautiful and useful, is considered a moral action and work of art is a moral imperative in its abstract and general form.

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