

Aesthetic and Artistic, Two Separate Concepts: The Dangers of 'Aesthetic Education'

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Introduction

It is very surprising that there is still an almost universal failure to recognise the significant distinction between the artistic and the aesthetic. It is surprising because when it is pointed out, the distinction is immediately obvious; the differences are often so great that it is bizarre to regard the artistic as of the same kind as the aesthetic. Because of the widespread, traditional and unquestioned assumption by philosophers and other theorists over centuries, I too accepted it at first. But then, one day, it struck me how absurd it is to regard them as synonymous, or, at least, to regard the artistic as a species of the aesthetic. It should have been obvious for years that they are quite different in kind. So I began to explore my new insight in greater depth and detail.

In this paper I shall try to show clearly that there are two distinct concepts. In drama, for instance, aesthetic considerations are usually either irrelevant or of minor significance in appreciation; one is not usually concerned with such questions as the elegance or beauty of a production, but rather with its meaning, how convincing it is, what insights it provides into aspects of life, etc. However, in some cases the distinction is not so clear — aesthetic considerations may contribute so largely to artistic appreciation as to be intrinsic to it.

In this respect dance is a particularly interesting and complex art form, in that very often, indeed usually, the aesthetic quality of the movements of the dancer may be *part of* one's artistic appreciation of the dance. This is most obviously true of classical ballet. However, it is important to be clear that there is still a distinction. Aesthetic quality is an intrinsic aspect of the appreciation and evaluation of the movements involved in sporting activities such as gymnastics, diving, skating, and many others. I distinguish elsewhere between these 'aesthetic' sports, and those which I call 'purposive' (Best 1974, 1978a Chapter 7, 1980). Although aesthetic considerations are intrinsic to aesthetic sports, they are not art. (See "Sport is not Art," Best 1985, 1986). So the character of dance as an art form depends not solely on the aesthetic quality of the constituent movements, important though these may be. Moreover, there are cases where the artistic quality of a dance may depend upon the *ugly* aesthetic quality of the movements of the dancers. That is, artistic merit may be conferred by aesthetic ugliness. The clearest example in my limited experience was *Cell*, choreographed many years ago by Robert Cohan, and performed by London Contemporary Dance Theatre. The point of this dance was to reveal the deleterious effects on human personality of living in a competitive society. Its success artistically was achieved by means of sharp,

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jagged, twisted movements, which were, considered purely aesthetically, disconcertingly unpleasing. I am sure that more knowledgeable readers will be able to think of other such examples.

In the art form of dance, the distinction and relationship between the aesthetic and the artistic is particularly intriguing, and would repay more detailed research, which I hope will be undertaken.

The Aesthetic and the Artistic

The source of the confusion is the vague, unquestioned assumption of a general metaphysical 'aesthetic,' which is supposed to be instantiated in both natural phenomena and works of art. It seems to be metaphysical because it is difficult to discover anyone who offers even remotely credible *reasons* for accepting this supposed general aesthetic faculty, attitude, kind of experience, etc. Indeed, most theorists offer no reasons at all. It is merely a vague underlying assumption. Even the rare theorists who have recognised that there must be a distinction have not drawn it adequately.

There are, then, *two*, quite *distinct*, although sometimes related, concepts. To put it as starkly as possible, a central feature of an object of *artistic* as opposed to *aesthetic* interest is, to put it roughly at this stage, that it can have subject matter. This is extremely significant for the possibility of learning from the arts, since, by contrast with aesthetic feelings, one's artistic feelings in response to works of art, and some of the most important reasons by which one can come to understand works of art, are frequently inseparably related to a wide variety of issues from *life generally*.

There are crucial educational implications, for this potential of the arts for deepening, extending, and sensitising our understanding and feelings about an immense variety of issues in life in general constitutes one of the most crucial contributions of the arts to education. Thus the question of the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic is of the utmost importance for education. For the assumption that they are concerned primarily with *aesthetic* pleasure, e.g. with beauty, trivialises the arts.

Aesthetic and the Generic Arts Fallacy

This notion of a general aesthetic dimension is sometimes adduced in support of the artistically and educationally damaging idea that the arts form a 'generic' area of the curriculum (I consider this question elsewhere: Best 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 1995). It is assumed that there is a general underlying metaphysical 'aesthetic,' which is instantiated in both artistic and aesthetic experience. This vague assumption is usually taken to imply some sort of unspecified aesthetic unity. To repeat, rarely are any *reasons* given in favour of it, despite its implausibility. A unified 'aesthetic' is simply, and remarkably generally, assumed.

The generic notion has had damaging practical consequences for educational policy decisions. For example, in August 1991 the Secretary of State for England and Wales, proposed that art and music should be offered by all

schools up to the age of 14, and then, "... it is our view that all schools should offer some sort of aesthetic experience in the curriculum for all 14-16 year olds." It is difficult to know what to make of such a vague injunction. Would looking at the trees and flowers be regarded as adequate? One *assumes* that 'artistic' is meant. In that case, it would seem probable that something like the confused notion of a general faculty or attitude lies behind it, and thus that any art form, or mixture of art forms, will contribute to its development. It may not imply that, although it seems highly likely. In any case, largely because of the confusion of the aesthetic and the artistic, it is impossible to be clear what it does mean.

The Dangers of 'Aesthetic Education'

In order to bring out more clearly the confusions inherent in the common use of 'aesthetic,' and to focus particularly on the educational implications, let us ask the question: What is aesthetic education? Which ability or potential in students is it the concern of aesthetic education to try to develop? The use of the term 'aesthetic education' may be misleading in ways which incur not only philosophical confusions, but errors of educational substance. At best it is not always clear which interests or activities are designated by the term, and at worst it may be construed in ways which can be potentially harmful, in a practical sense, to educational policy.

The Aesthetic Attitude

A deeper and more detailed philosophical account of the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic is available elsewhere.¹ It is too complex an issue to elaborate here, since I wish mainly to spell out its consequences for education. It is sufficient now to show that there are two distinct concepts which are often, and surprisingly, conflated. As we have seen, this conflation can be seen in the prevalent notion that there is, to put it roughly, a *general* aesthetic attitude which applies to and can be developed by experience of either natural phenomena, such as sunsets, birdsong, mountains and flowers, or the arts. For instance, Beardsley (1979: 728) writes: "... the concept of aesthetic value as a distinct kind of value enables us to draw a distinction that is indispensable to the enterprise of art criticism," and later (1979: 746): "... many natural objects, such as mountains and trees ... seem to have a value that is closely akin to that of artworks. This kinship can easily be explained in terms of aesthetic value" Carritt (1953) and Hepburn (1966) express the view that experience of natural beauty may be indistinguishable from that of art, while Urmson (1957) takes natural beauty to be the paradigm case from which the aesthetic attitude to the arts is derived. Wollheim (1970) takes the opposite view and criticises those accounts of the aesthetic attitude, such as those of Kant and Bullough, which take as central "... cases which are really peripheral or secondary; that is, cases where what we regard as a work of art is, in point of fact, a piece of uncontrived nature."

It should be noticed that all these views accept without question that there is only *one* concept or attitude involved. Disagreement arises over the question of whether the arts, or natural beauty, respectively, are the paradigm

expressions of it. Yet, as Beardsmore (1973) argues, in an interesting paper on this issue:

... there are aspects of art appreciation which cannot be understood if one thinks of our reactions to a play as a complicated version of our reactions to a rose. And there are aspects of the love of nature which make no sense if one has before one's mind the way in which people respond to paintings and sculptures.

He also points out that it is possible to imagine a society in which there is no appreciation of the arts, yet still a love of natural beauty, and indeed that this is to some extent true, for example of children, in our society.

But perhaps the clearest way to show that there are two distinct concepts involved here, and thus that the notion of a general aesthetic attitude, in this sense, is misleading, is to draw attention to the fact that almost anything can be considered from an aesthetic point of view, *including* works of art. Thus it is perfectly possible to consider at least many works of art from *both* an aesthetic *and* an artistic point of view. An example will illustrate what I mean. In my childhood, I was privileged to attend a performance by Ram Gopal, the great Indian classical Bharatanatyam dancer. I was thrilled by the superb quality of his performance, yet I was quite unable to understand it since I knew nothing of the significance of, for instance, the range of subtle and intricate hand gestures, each with precise meaning, characteristic of this mode of dance. Clearly my appreciation must have been aesthetic not artistic. To take another example, an art lecturer of my acquaintance who had hung a painting he esteemed highly in a prominent position in his College was asked by the Principal to remove it since it did not blend with the decor. The Principal's concern was obviously with the aesthetic, whereas the lecturer's was with the artistic quality of the work.

This is not, of course, in the least to deny that, (a) there are borderline cases, or cases where the two concepts are indistinguishable, and (b) there is often a complex, interdependent relationship between them. As we have seen, even where one *does* understand a dance performance, the aesthetic quality of the movements of a dancer is, perhaps usually, *intrinsic* to one's artistic appreciation of the dance. Similarly, considerations of the context in which it should hang are by no means irrelevant to artistic appreciation of a painting. And certainly an aesthetic appraisal of, for instance, the use of colours may be inseparable from artistic appreciation of a painting. Again, poetry may be aesthetically pleasing when it is read aloud even in a language one does not understand, yet clearly such aesthetic qualities as the sound of poetry are by no means irrelevant to an artistic appraisal of it. The works of Dylan Thomas and Verlaine are good examples, while this aspect of this work was so important to Gerard Manley Hopkins that he marked the syllables which he wanted to be stressed.

Aesthetic judgements may be made about almost anything. Hence a practical danger of the conflation is that it could be seen as legitimising a reduction, or even the elimination, of arts teaching in schools. 'Aesthetic education,' regarded (unintelligibly) as the development of a general faculty,

including the arts, could be achieved by taking children on nature-walks, watching sunsets, etc., without the unnecessary expense of arts resources and teachers. That this is no abstract danger is shown by the examples in Primary schools cited by Rod Taylor (1993). It actually happened.

A further consideration of the distinction and relation between the aesthetic and artistic would seem to me to be of interest, and the issue would repay further thought, (to repeat, it is especially important for the art form of dance) but it is beyond the scope of this paper. For my present purposes it is sufficient to show that there are two separable concepts here, and this can be achieved by pointing out that it is possible coherently to consider, from an aesthetic point of view, a work of art of which one has no understanding. The nature of the understanding involved raises an important consequence for education, which will be considered below.

Educational Justifications

With respect to education there are numerous examples of this elision of the aesthetic and the artistic, or the assumption that they are one and the same concept. Sometimes it is of no consequence that the terms are used interchangeably, or that 'aesthetic' is taken to be the generic term. But sometimes, as a consequence, justifications for the arts are assumed to apply equally to activities which are, or which are claimed to be, of primarily aesthetic interest. For instance, such a confusion is very common in the literature on physical education. Examples can be seen in Lowe (1976), while Anthony (1968) and Reid (1970) quote others. Often the arguments which incorporate this elision purport to offer an educational justification for physical education. It is assumed that there is no doubt about the educational credentials of the arts. (Some of us who, in the present hostile economic and educational climate, know what an uphill struggle it is to convince sceptics imbued with the prevailing materialism and scientism, of the profound human value of the arts, might be permitted a wry smile at such bland optimism — but that is by the way.) That is, the arts are taken to be unquestionably respectable educationally, and it is thought that, by showing the *aesthetic* value of physical education activities, it can be shown *ipso facto* that they have the same educational respectability. A classic case is a paper by Carlisle (1969), significantly entitled "The Concept of Physical Education." Carlisle argues that the 'unifying concept' of physical education is the aesthetic, appearing to assume that, if his case is sound, the educational credentials of physical education are as assured as those of the arts. (There are other confusions inherent in this way of thinking, which I have exposed elsewhere in Best 1978b).

To repeat, it is surprising that this distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic is so commonly overlooked. To say that a lady is beautiful is not to say that she is a work of art. Nor, despite the supposed aesthetic achievements of beauty treatments, is the enterprise of trying to improve feminine appearance an art form. Yet frequently it is assumed that because terms of aesthetic appraisal are commonly or normally applied to an object or activity that that

is a good reason for regarding it as an art form. For instance, in support of her argument that sports can be classified as art, Ruth Saw (1961) writes:

Star performances in ice hockey, cricket, football, and sports generally are valued almost as much for their elegance as for their run-making or goal-getting ability ... Sports commentators use the terms of aesthetic appraisal as freely as do art critics.

I consider this issue more fully in Best 1980.

Louis Arnaud Reid's definition of the artistic in terms of the aesthetic (1970) also fails for similar reasons. On his view, the artistic is that which is intentionally created or performed for aesthetic value. But there are many counter-examples of objects intentionally created for aesthetic value which are certainly not art. One of the most obvious is coloured toilet paper.

I hope it is clear that I do not in the least wish to deny that there may be value in encouraging a developing interest in and appreciation of aesthetic aspects of sporting and physical education activities. My point is that it cannot be assumed that in doing so one is developing an attitude or ability which will necessarily contribute, or even have *any* relevance, to one's understanding and appreciation of the arts.

Beauty

Some years ago a letter was written to a journal objecting to a paper in which I had argued for the objectivity of artistic appreciation. The author objected that my argument was a straw man, since, he insisted, the real issue, which has for centuries been the principal quest of philosophy of the arts, concerns such explicitly evaluative judgements as "This is a beautiful painting."

He was right that this has been the traditional quest of the philosopher, but that quest is thoroughly misconceived. It is the persistent conflation of the aesthetic and the artistic which is the straw man: the traditional assumption that beauty (or, worse, Beauty) is the central issue is integral to it. Despite this still-prevalent assumption (perhaps especially in continental Europe), questions of beauty are usually irrelevant to artistic appreciation. Imagine going to music concerts, plays, art-exhibitions, etc., with someone who says he appreciates these arts, yet who, when asked for his opinion of a work, always replies: "It is (or is not) beautiful," or some similar comment. We ask his opinion of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, and again he replies: "They are beautiful." If this were the only kind of response he made, that would constitute good grounds for believing that he *lacked* the ability for artistic appreciation. One would be bewildered, for example, if following a powerful production of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* one were to be asked whether the play was beautiful. That may be an intelligible question about some works of art, for instance ballet, but for many it would make little or no sense. Even those with a high artistic regard for Francis Bacon's works are unlikely to regard them as beautiful. Indeed, many artists would, justifiably, regard it as insulting to have their work discussed in terms of beauty. It has been scathingly said that beauty is what the bourgeoisie pays the artist for.

Artistic appreciation is rather revealed in the ability, for instance, to discuss, recognise, and propose valid and perceptive interpretations, and to give reasons for what one values in a work.

In many cases aesthetic judgements may amount simply to individual preference or subjective taste, as, for instance, in the choice of ice cream, house-decorations, etc. These may involve little or no rational or cognitive content. In other cases, such as gymnastics and other sports, valid aesthetic judgements certainly do require relevant understanding. Yet since aesthetic judgements can often be plausibly regarded as expressions of mere subjective preference, to fail to distinguish the aesthetic and the artistic may be to connive in the perniciously prevalent misconception that artistic appreciation is also a matter of mere non-rational, subjective taste or preference, or that artistic values are merely a matter of individual psychology.

Thus, the failure to recognise the importance of the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic may contribute largely to the trivialisation of the potential educational value of the arts.

Aesthetic Attitude continued

Even if, on the basis of the foregoing discussion, we now restrict our considerations to the aesthetic, properly so-called, the notion of a general attitude or faculty is still misleading. It cannot be assumed *a priori* that the development of an increasing aesthetic appreciation, for instance of sunsets, mountain ranges and trees, will necessarily increase one's ability to appreciate the aesthetic quality of the movements of a pole-vaulter or cricketer. To mention briefly just one important aspect of this issue, in order fully to appreciate the aesthetic aspects of an activity one frequently needs to have an understanding of it. One can intelligibly appraise the aesthetic quality of a movement only in terms of a *context*, although it may be implicit. For example, a movement which may be graceful in a ballet may be grotesque as part of a service action in tennis. (This issue is more fully considered elsewhere: Best 1978a: 110-112.) And one can fully appreciate the elegance of a cover drive only if one knows something about cricket. Thus, at least in many cases, aesthetic quality is particular to a particular kind of activity, and may be recognisable or fully appreciated only by someone with some knowledge of it.

Of course this is not to deny that the development of the ability for aesthetic appreciation may in *some* cases apply to more than one kind of activity. What the argument does reveal is that the notion of a general aesthetic ability can be misleading, and is obviously false if it is construed as implying that the ability for aesthetic appreciation in one sphere will necessarily confer the ability for aesthetic appreciation in any other sphere — for instance, of any object or activity.

Artistic Attitude

With respect to the arts, an analogous notion, i.e. of a general artistic attitude, faculty or ability, is even more absurd. Again, this is not to deny that someone may reveal the ability to create or appreciate in various art forms, or that, in

particular cases, there may be a relation between one art form and another, and thus, for instance, that to develop the ability to appreciate one may help in the appreciation of another. What I am denying is that such a relation can be assumed between any and all art forms.

Some years ago I was invited to lecture at a college where I was asked to provide my student audience with general aesthetic criteria which they could apply across the board of the arts, as it were, i.e. to such diverse activities as dance, drama, music and the visual arts. There was some dismay at my showing that the desire for such general criteria is fundamentally misconceived. Purported general criteria, such as unity, which were, and still are in some quarters, seized upon with relief as satisfying the seductive craving for a cross-artistic yardstick, can be seen to be of little value. For in some works of art precisely what is required is *disunity*. Virginia Woolf expresses the point in this way:

The mind receives a myriad impressions. ... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. ... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness (quoted in James 1966).

It is this possibility of the arts which will almost always, and in my view admirably, frustrate attempts to draw up definitions and general criteria. For the artist's intention may be to express in his/her work a conception which *contradicts* any such proposed definition or general criterion. He may want to show that there are aspects of human experience which do not conform to it.

The classic, well-tried move, by those attempting to defend the indefensible, may follow, in order to defend the notion of a general criterion against such counter-examples. It may be said that even in *disunity* there is unity, in a certain sense. But the price of such a defence is high, since the criterion has been rendered vacuous. That is, to put the point perversely, the claim may certainly now be regarded as 'valid,' but only at the cost of vacuity, since the re-defining of 'unity' in order to save the universal application of the criterion has removed the distinction between 'unity' and 'disunity'.

I do not want to go so far as to insist that there can be no general criterion of artistic merit. That is, I do not wish to make the general point about art that there can be no general point about art. I am inclined to think that, to put it roughly, as a general criterion, it should not be possible to state comprehensively what the artist is trying to express except in terms of the particular work of art. To the extent that this is possible, for instance where there is an explicit political or moral 'message' which is independently specifiable, then it is, in my view, necessarily, an artistic failing. But this is an issue which requires a separate paper. What is important for the present issue is that, in any case, it does not militate against, but rather supports, my main point that the notion of a general artistic attitude is misleading. For what it emphasises is that in order fully to appreciate the conception expressed in a work of art it is necessary to understand *that particular* art form. One could

not, as it were, be provided with some sort of 'ideal' external measuring rod which could be used to appraise the various arts.

This is the point of the so-called 'heresy of paraphrase,' i.e. the notion that it is a 'heresy' to suppose that what is expressed in one work of art could be paraphrased in another. The same point is expressed in the aphorism that all the arts aspire to the condition of music. What is meant by this is, I think, that in music more than in other art forms the inseparability of form and content is more often more immediately obvious, which is why it frequently sounds so odd to try to speak of the *meaning* of a piece of music (e.g. Bach's *Fifth Brandenburg Concerto*). Nevertheless, this characteristic is equally, if less immediately obviously, true of other art forms. As I suggested above, to the extent that the meaning can be expressed independently of the particular work of art, the work is a failure.

Although the issue requires a separate paper, this indicates the fallacy which underlies a possible criticism of my emphasis on the relationship of the arts to life-issues. The objection is that such an emphasis reduces the arts to the merely instrumental, and that it ignores the intrinsic value in the arts. The objection is confused. As I have too briefly indicated, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value collapses, since *what* is said about life in a work of art is *inseparable* from that particular work.

A qualification is necessary, as I indicated above. For I do not want to say that there is no relation at all between different art forms. The arts grow out of and contribute to the life of people in a society. The emotions expressed in art, for instance, could not be understood without an understanding of the emotions of life generally. Hence different art forms from the same socio-historical context may well reveal certain similarities or affinities, in a relatively broad, undifferentiated sense. And understanding one art form may contribute to some extent to understanding another, since each has grown from a cultural ethos in isolation from which the arts would be incomprehensible. But, ultimately, artistic appreciation is concerned with *particular* discrimination. The more deeply one becomes immersed in an art form, the more specific becomes one's capacity for appreciation, and thus the less does it make sense to conceive of a general artistic attitude.

Meanings

Although more explanation is required than I can include here, it is important to alert readers to various different and, sometimes mystifying, or even pretentiously high-flown but vacuous usages.

- *Aesthetics*. This refers to a subject of study. To avoid confusion, I much prefer to refer to it as the philosophy of the arts.
- The *Aesthetic*, or *aesthetic*. This refers to the metaphysical conception discussed above, which is the source of considerable obscurity.
- *aesthetic*. This refers to the congeries of notions such as beauty, elegance, etc., and their opposites.
- *artistic*. This term is used to relate to one of the art forms.

There is also another fairly common use, which is nevertheless obscure, such as, in the notice of a forthcoming drama conference, which, it is stated, will appeal to those with an interest in developing an "aesthetic understanding of drama." I do not know what, if anything, that means. Unless it amounts merely to pretentious vacuity, my guess is that it refers to philosophical issues which arise in drama. If so, it would be much clearer to say so.

An even clearer unclear example appears in the mission statement of the drama department of a local college, which proclaims: "The power of Drama is when the aesthetic is brought into play." Although this kind of usage is common, it is hopelessly obscure. It seems to offer a vague mystique of profundity, impressing the gullible with obscurantism. It may appear to say something impressive, while actually saying nothing. One philosopher called the aesthetic the natural home of rapturous and soporific effusion.

One needs to keep a sharp critical eye on the use of 'aesthetic.'

The Dangers

I have tried to indicate some of the ways in which the term 'aesthetic education' may mislead. I hope it is clear that a consideration of the issues involved does not consist merely in arid philosophical hair-splitting, perhaps of some esoteric academic interest, but of no practical relevance to education. It is relevant in at least two principal ways. First, where the term is taken to designate a *general* attitude or faculty, one consequence may be, as we have seen, the explicit claim, or implicit assumption, that by encouraging an *aesthetic* enjoyment or appreciation of, for instance, natural phenomena, or athletic movements, one is, or can be, helping children to develop the ability for *artistic* enjoyment or appreciation. Such a confusion is quite natural if the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic is overlooked. Although not explicitly formulated in this way, it seems to imply that each of us has something like a general faculty which includes not only latent ability in arts such as music, poetry and painting, but also the potential for appreciating sunsets, birdsong and graceful movements. That is, the notion seems to be of a faculty which can be developed in any of these ways, rather as a muscle may be developed by various forms of exercise.

The conception only needs to be spelled out as explicitly as this to be revealed as absurd. For, to repeat the point, it could surely never be seriously supposed that increasing a child's awareness of the aesthetic quality of a gymnast will *ipso facto* increase his/her capacity for the appreciation of poetry or music, or that to develop an understanding of one art form will necessarily give an understanding of others.

Unfortunately, it is not always explicitly spelled out, and this can have serious consequences, especially at this time of economic exigency in education. For instance, I was told of the Principal of one college who, even in the relatively halcyon days before the onset of the current educational siege, was seriously considering the economy of closing down the visual arts teaching in the college on the grounds that the students' aesthetic education was catered for in their dance. In the proposed new arts curriculum of another

college, it was stated that "the days of the separate arts disciplines are numbered." Similar misconceptions are, unfortunately, by no means uncommon.

Of course one recognises that any school is limited in what it can teach. There is neither the time nor the available expertise to teach all the subjects which may be desirable in order to give students the breadth of experience which one would like ideally to offer to them. But at least let us face frankly the character of the problem. A single, general aesthetic or artistic faculty might be very convenient economically, but it is a myth. This is not to deny the meaningfulness of ascribing to someone a general understanding of the arts. But what it means is that he has received a broad education in, for instance, dance, music, sculpture, drama, poetry, etc. There is no short cut through only *one* of these avenues, which will somehow compensate for the lack of artistic experience and understanding in other art forms.

Learning and Understanding: Art and Life

It is the second consequence of the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic which seems to me by far the most important aspect of the issue educationally. For a failure to distinguish the two concepts might well incur a failure to recognise that the notions of learning and understanding are far more complex and wide-ranging for artistic appreciation than for aesthetic appreciation.

Let us approach the question by considering again the common misconception that the aesthetic and the artistic are aspects of the same, 'aesthetic' concept. For instance, as we have seen, Beardsley (1979) writes that:

... many natural objects, such as mountains and trees ... seem to have a value that is closely akin to that of artworks. This kinship can easily be explained in terms of aesthetic value ...

This seems to me such a remarkably implausible thing to say that one immediately suspects the influence of a deeply embedded, unquestioned preconception. For how, otherwise, could it be seriously supposed that Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a Japanese Noh play, Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, and an Indian raga are 'closely akin' to mountains and trees. Is there a 'kinship' between the oak tree in my garden and the film *Schindler's List*? Can this supposed kinship be explained *at all*, let alone easily? The striking thing is that it never is explained, except by obviously unsatisfactory resort to vague metaphysical notions such as Forms of Beauty, a mysterious transcendent Aesthetic, etc. There is just an unsupported assertion: no reasons are offered for a very implausible claim. Clearly, this is a consequence of bizarre crossing of conceptual wires, i.e. *two* concepts are being confusedly run together. Aesthetic appreciation of nature cannot intelligibly be regarded as falling within the same concept or category as artistic appreciation of a performance of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, of James Joyce's *The Dead*, of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Yet the distinction, although obvious when pointed out, is almost universally ignored, and it is very far from being a mere quibble. Implicit in it,

and in the examples I have adduced to reveal it, is by far the most important issue for the value of the arts in education. For, to put it starkly, by contrast with the aesthetic, it is a central feature of the arts that they can have a subject matter (this needs qualification, please see Best 1993). For example, through his work, an artist can give expression to an immensely varied range of conceptions of aspects of life generally. Obviously, it would make no sense to attribute this possibility to aesthetic judgements of nature: flowers, autumn leaves, mountains and birdsong, however beautiful, cannot intentionally raise questions about social issues. Thus a further danger of conflating the two concepts is that it contributes to the notion that the arts are entirely autonomous, cut off from the life of society, isolated from significant human concerns. Of course, not all works of art can intelligibly be said to have a subject matter. But it is a central and important possibility of all the art *forms*. It is this characteristic of the arts which explains their powerful significance in almost all societies. Throughout the centuries, for instance, the arts have deeply enriched religious feelings, and have raised seminal, influential, and often profoundly disturbing questions on moral, social and political issues. That is, a central aspect of the values intrinsic to the arts is their inseparable relationship to and influence on the life of society.

This characteristic of the arts is poignantly illustrated by the reported visit to Picasso of a German officer during the occupation of France during the last war. He noticed *Guernica*, which Picasso had painted as an expression of his revulsion at the bombing of the little Spanish town of that name by the German fascists. Impressed by the painting, the officer asked, "Did you do that?," to which Picasso replied, "No, you did."

In view of this deeply significant possibility, is it not remarkable that there is such a striking ambivalence about the arts? On one hand, as we know to our cost, the arts are commonly regarded as peripheral, expendable in education. It is assumed that they are merely for entertainment, enjoyment or catharsis, from which nothing of significance can be learned. Hence the arts are marginalised in the curriculum.

Yet, on the other hand, the powerful possibilities of learning from the arts are clearly conceded in the frequent nervousness about the arts exhibited by authoritarian régimes. It is all too common for artists to be censored, banned, imprisoned, tortured and executed. *Why*, if there is nothing of significance to be learned from the arts? Mathematics and the sciences, the core subjects, do not normally frighten such régimes.

Does this not show unquestionably that the values implicit in the arts are of profound human significance, and thus that the arts should be given a more central place in the curriculum?

The conflation of the aesthetic and the artistic contributes to this trivialising of artistic values, and to the emasculation of their powerful educational potential. It should be emphasised, too, that I use the term 'education' in its broadest sense, since through involvement with the arts one can continue to learn, in a deep, humanly important sense, all one's life.

Certainly aesthetic appreciation can and should be progressively developed. But there is far less involved, for instance, in learning to appreciate natural beauty than in learning to appreciate art. Moreover, the most crucial aspect of this issue is that artistic appreciation, at least in the case of most art forms, requires not solely a grasp of the traditions and conventions of the art forms, but also, very often, insights into, and understanding and experience of life. This is the central characteristic of the concept of art, and it largely explains why it is so difficult for school children to appreciate the great works of literature, such as those of Shakespeare. In such cases it is obvious that artistic understanding cannot intelligibly be regarded as distinct from an understanding of life generally. To learn to appreciate the arts very often requires a reference to, for instance, moral dilemmas, personal relationships, social, political and emotional issues, the difficulty of learning to recognise the truth about oneself. Indeed, many would be inclined to say that this aspect is or should be the most important contribution of the arts to education. It emphasises the remarkable absurdity and short-sightedness of the current tendency to undervalue and disregard the arts, as superficial luxuries, expendable if necessary in favour of the supposed 'basics' in education. Such an attitude reflects the dangerously prevalent misconception that the arts are simply for entertainment, pleasure or recreation, from which, unlike for example the sciences, there is nothing of significance to be *learned*. (With characteristic perception, George Eliot exquisitely captures this conception of art when she refers to the artistic accomplishments of the educated young ladies of the Victorian era as 'small tinklings and smearings'.) Yet, especially in view of the tensions and frustrations which are so destructively evident in so many countries, it is hard to understand how it *can* be seriously believed that, for instance, arithmetical or mathematical skills, important though they may be, are obviously more 'basic' than the kinds of understanding, for example of emotional and moral issues, which can be gained from the arts.

These days there is far too dominant an emphasis on vocational skills and materialism. While such aspects are important, they need to be balanced by at least an equal emphasis on the *quality* of life — the development of creative attitudes, through the arts, personal relationships, moral and emotional education. To continue with the present attitude to the core curriculum could be seriously counter-productive, for *unless* people have learned how to direct their creative energies, and how to develop their emotional potentialities, there will be explosions of violent frustration in some, and degeneration into vegetating apathy in others. The evidence of these effects is all too clear, in many societies.

For instance, one of the most important contributions of education through the arts is to develop the possibility of increasingly discriminating emotional expressions and responses. It is undoubtedly enormously difficult to oppose the conformist pressures, such as those of television advertising, and the so-called pop-culture, towards a bland, superficial uniformity of cliché expressions. But a person with only trite forms of expression is a person with only trite possibilities of experience — and this includes emotions and

personal relationships. Simone Weil (1968), castigating the escapism and romanticism of much literature, makes the point:

But it is not only in literature that fiction generates immorality. It does so in life itself. For the substance of our life is almost exclusively composed of fiction. We fictionalise our future; and unless we are heroically devoted to truth, we fictionalise our past, refashioning it to our taste. We do not *study* other people; we *invent* what they are thinking, saying and doing (My italics).

How profoundly, and sadly, true it is that we do *not* study other people, to learn to recognise what is objectively there, in *them*. We approach them, as we approach other aspects of life, with the blinkers of our clichés. And our feelings about them are inevitably as limited to superficial generality as the possibility of our understanding them.

It is one of the main contributions of the arts to open the progressive integrity of vision, which will identify a deeper integrity of feeling.

Conclusion

The aspect of the distinction to which I am trying to draw attention gives a rationale for the claim that some of the most important aspects of education can be achieved *through* the arts, and thus that the arts have a legitimate claim to be regarded *as* basic, or part of any 'core' curriculum.

This characteristic marks a distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic which is of particular significance for education in that, to repeat the point, the notions of learning and understanding in the arts cannot be intelligibly regarded as distinct from learning and understanding in life-situations generally. This is not to say that the aesthetic is autonomous, with no relation to the rest of life. On the contrary, an aesthetic appreciation of nature may be internally related to, one's expression of, a conception of, or attitude to life in general. Nevertheless, it could much more easily be supposed that the use of aesthetic terms could be learned in isolation from a general experience of life, than that artistic appreciation could be so learned. The educational implications are both obvious and important, since most of the arts can give expression to conceptions of the *whole range* of the human condition.

So perhaps the principal danger of the use of the term 'aesthetic education' is that such implications may be obscured, and artistic criteria may be assumed to be the same as aesthetic criteria. For where the aesthetic is concerned there is no place for taking such subject-matter — indeed, the very *notion* of *any* subject-matter makes no sense with respect to the aesthetic.

This crucially significant difference between the two concepts is what gives humorous point to Oscar Wilde's description of a sunset as only a second-rate Turner.

The danger to which I am drawing attention is that criteria may be employed which either are inappropriate, or, more likely, although to *some* extent appropriate, fail to take account of this crucial characteristic of the arts. For instance, in many of the arts, in contrast to the aesthetic, an important

criterion of artistic merit may often be, to put it roughly, the extent to which a work gives an original and perceptive vision of nature, of contemporary society, or of some other aspect of the human condition. That is, such a fresh, imaginative, incisive vision of an aspect of life may be one of the *central* criteria of artistic merit. And that is to say that, through the arts, it is very often possible to encourage a fresh, imaginative and incisive vision of and attitude to life itself.

There could hardly be a more important aim in education.

Endnotes:

¹ My initial work on this distinction was published in "The Aesthetic and the Artistic," *Philosophy*, the journal of The Royal Institute of Philosophy, July 1982, and slightly revised later as Chapter 12 of my book *The Rationality of Feeling*, London: Falmer Press, 1993. Readers, who would like to see a more extensive and deeper philosophical examination of the central questions, should consult these publications.

This paper mainly examines the educational implications of my original work on the distinction, and is a slightly revised version of a paper originally published in *Oxford Review of Education* 10(2), 1984, and subsequently in *The Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* (India) XVIII(1-2), 1997.

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