

## A Defense of Art: The Dichotomy of Creator and Creation

“All art is quite useless,” proclaimed Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for art should have “no meaning but its beauty, no message but its joy.” In recent years, however, art has become a subject of moral judgment, in which a creator’s biographical considerations by default triumph over the emotional and aesthetic merit of their artwork. Consequently, the moral permissibility of admiring works by ethically flawed individuals falls into doubt. For the purposes of this paper, I define “art” as any product or work of human imagination, including but not limited to paintings, sculptures, and music; the “artist” henceforth is an individual actively engaged in the production of such works. I contend that an artist's moral character should not impact the appreciation of their works, as ethical and artistic dimensions are discrete in the evaluation of art. To begin, I will examine the potential repercussions of widespread social repression of artists who deviate from prevailing moral standards. Subsequently, I will present and discuss the dichotomous relationship between moral character and aesthetic value by examining the separation of creator and creation, which forms the cornerstone of my argument.

There are essentially two opponents to my viewpoint: firstly, the belief in inferiority, and secondly, the belief in attachment. The former, the belief in inferiority, views art as an article to be praised or removed based on its creator’s personal conduct. It is on this belief that society today, in response to immorality, prescribes “cancel culture,” where morally questionable names face enduring reputational harm (Matthes, 2021). To cancel is to, by definition, ostracize those behaving unacceptably, implying that morality supersedes artistic value: art by so-called “bad people” is, by its reasoning, inherently unworthy of approval, regardless of the qualities of the work itself. Cancel culture, being a recent phenomenon, affects mostly contemporary artists.

Suppose, however, we apply its principles to every artistic period in human history; in consequence, any artist who has exhibited the slightest moral depravity should have their works and contributions expunged from recognition. This mass expungement would include some of the greatest works of art, having emerged from some of the worst of people: Caravaggio, famous for his dramatic treatment of light and shade, was a murderer; Richard Wagner, a pioneer of the modern opera, was an antisemite; Rudyard Kipling, celebrated for his evocative storytelling, was a proponent of imperialism. Suppose one listened to the music of Wagner without any awareness of its origin; after being told about its authorship, is one supposed to feel morally reprehensible? Certainly, I am not trying to justify or advocate for immoral behaviour, but if we outright dismiss artwork simply due to their producers' moral failings, what of human creativity would remain in this world? We would sanitize the artistic landscape, where nuanced expression yields to what is considered "morally acceptable" in contemporary terms. Art would succumb to the faults of their makers and therefore merely serve as a reflection of their creator's moral compass. It is in the spirit of departing from this predicament that I present the alternative where the art and the artist are unconnected and evaluated independently of each other.

The concept of dissociating art from the artist was first advanced by the ancient Greek tragic drama, wherein the purpose of artistic expression was to evoke a cathartic response in the audience through the purgation of pity and fear, and consequently the relief of unconscious conflicts. This catharsis, as Aristotle contends in his *Poetics*, can be achieved irrespective of the moral standing of the artist, as the emotional release is facilitated by the art itself, rather than the artist's conduct (Stamatopoulou, 2016). Similarly, what Aristotle applies to theatre is extrapolated by Immanuel Kant centuries later to all creative forms. Expanding upon the Aristotelian catharsis,

Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* postulates that artistic interpretations ought to be 'disinterested,' or devoid of any influence, from moral character, and autonomous in their evaluation of the work's inherent beauty (Ginsborg, 2005). Kant's conception of 'disinterestedness' implicitly emphasizes the need to focus on the formal aspects of a piece of art – the aesthetic qualities – rather than the artist's morality. The transcendent power of the artwork should consequently eclipse the artist's personal flaws. That is the dichotomy argument – the dissociation of artist and art – and it lies in the distinction between the moral and aesthetic realms. The former, regarding the conscience of the painter, writer, or composer, addresses the qualities of merely the creator; the latter, pertaining to the composition, perspective, and effect of a work, addresses the intrinsic qualities of the creation itself.

This raises the second opponent to my argument: the belief in attachment, or the understanding that art without consideration of morality loses meaning. In this case, one may argue that the ignorance of morality is improper, given that we, as morally-centred beings, naturally seek the difference between right and wrong. The stifling of moral perspectives, in this view, would henceforth diminish the artistic profundity of a work; after all, what would remain in an artwork without the moral associations that surround it? In response, I contend that the discernment of right and wrong is only applicable to entities capable of right and wrong; art is no such entity. In other words, morality at its core is a judgment of behaviour, or the way in which one acts; it should be a limitation placed on actions and entities capable of action, and for that reason, not a restriction placed on art, which has neither the sapience nor capacity to act. Art should therefore exist purely for the sake of itself, permeated only by beauty and emotion as perceived by the human mind. From this perspective, the essence of art is not fundamentally tied to morality, and thus, it is

possible to appreciate art for its aesthetic value alone, independent of the artist's personal details. That separation, known as the “death of the author” from literary critic Roland Barthes’ essay of the same name, emphasizes the autonomy of the viewer, hence permitting the engagement with art on a personal level and the derivation of artistic meaning separate from the artist’s morality.

In a letter to the *St. James’s Gazette*, Oscar Wilde repudiated the supposed immorality of *Dorian Gray*: “[A]rt and ... ethics are absolutely distinct and separate.” Complementary to his literary renown, Wilde was an ardent philosopher of art who offered a remedy for our preoccupation with passing judgment on the moral conduct of artists. A devoted aesthete, he assumed a prominent role within the movement against the prevailing ethos demanding that art serve as moral guidance (Duggan). “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book,” he insists, again in *Dorian Gray*, for books are either “well written or badly written; that is all.” To appreciate art, and only art itself, is to acknowledge the divergence between an observer’s conscious reality and a work’s fictional world, in which moral standards need not apply. Thus, let artistry be the objects of aesthetic judgment, unbound by our principles of right and wrong. Personal virtues and flaws should not be determinants of artistic merit; morality should not triumph over human expression, lest “art [become] sterile, and Beauty [pass] away from the land.”

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