INTRODUCTION

by

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Ever since human beings became distinct sorts of creatures, they have taken pleasure in imitating the natural world and the events of their fellow humans. Such imitators often concentrated on a kind of formal perfection in their objects, and in a certain grandness in the actions they represented; they strove in their representations for the "beautiful." Although all civilizations worthy of the name have pointed to the achievements of their artists as typical of, indeed, definitive of, such a civilized life, the fact of there being art at all and the nature of its importance have also always been puzzling. Why there should be such an activity at all, what sort of pleasure this might be, and whether the activity and our enjoyment of it are important or worthwhile in a human community are among the earliest questions raised by the first philosophers, especially by Plato and Aristotle. The fact that human beings like to gather in the dark and watch other human beings pretend to be characters who often do horrible or hilarious things to each other; the presence of marble versions of gods and animals and humans in public spaces (why reproduce something when the originals are all over the place?), the delight taken in highly artificial and unusual arrangement of words and in their metric and aural properties, and the efforts made by human beings to produce sounds in various harmonic (and even dissonant) relations to each other are all on the face of it, and in the light of how much effort the great struggle for existence itself costs, rather mysterious.

Since there is a natural human pleasure in learning, and since we often learn by imitation, Aristotle suggested that this link with learning and human nature might guide reflection about the function and value of art. Since we seem especially interested in representing the beautiful, and in dramatic depictions of very great, heroic, and thereby beautiful (fine, noble) men and women and their beautiful deeds, and since the power of the beautiful to sway

our judgment and move our emotions is so great (and has seemed to many linked somehow with our sexual desire and erotic natures), it seemed reasonable to Plato to try to understand (and to assess) this pleasure and its importance by understanding the role of the emotions (especially the role of the erotic) in human life.

The fact that we desire the beautiful, both in art and in natural and romantic contexts, reveals something about our basic erotic nature, according to Plato, about what we want by nature. The desire for the beautiful reveals, it was claimed, that desire is not satisfiable in a wholly sensible way or by sensible particulars, that what we finally want to possess is not just a beautiful body but the beauty manifested by other bodies and in even "higher," more perfect forms. There might also be a great deal that anyone needs to know in living a life, but which is so elusive and difficult that such knowledge could not be formulated in philosophical claims and arguments, but which could be presented more intuitively, indirectly, and experientially in aesthetic experience. (Although Plato's and Aristotle's views are quite different, this link between our interest in the beautiful and what both understood to be the fundamental human desire—for wisdom—unites them, even if Plato seemed to worry in the *Republic* more about the dangerous political effects of art's emotional power.) The idea that our love of beauty manifests something fundamental about human nature itself will play a recurring role in reflections on the aesthetic dimension of life.

Moreover, since the role of human emotions can be very powerful, and since artists and poets can be extremely effective at exciting and directing such emotions, such artists and poets might be quite powerful or politically influential in a community. If such skill at imitating and reproducing is *so* great that the observer can even be made to forget that he is seeing a particular perspective and believes that the poet's view of human life, the family, the gods' and human beings' place in the cosmos, is simply true, then that power is all the greater. Epic and tragic poets might assume the role of the moral educators in a community, powerfully swaying audiences to admire or reject various human individuals and types.

Such assumptions set the stage for a great controversy or ancient "quarrel," when one begins to worry about our being led so effectively by those who know more how to lead than where they should lead us. Could it even be possible that an ideal human city might be better off

without artists and poets, that they should be banned? Could Socrates have been serious about such a famous proposal in Plato's *Republic*?

It is worthy of note that the earliest philosophical discussion of the arts had so much to do with such concerns about the putative *danger* of the arts, its role in education, its effects on the emotions and allegiances of citizens. Such issues have obviously not gone away (although provincial libraries now go after J. D. Salinger rather than Homer) and frame the discussion even for some who oppose Plato's views. Aristotle, for example, may have mounted a kind of indirect defense of the tragic poets against such Platonic charges (arguing that the emotional experience felt in viewing tragic drama was "cathartic," a kind of release, and thereby useful, that the experience of such pity and fear could be politically moderating or humbling, not dangerous or excessive), but his account was also framed as an element of a political philosophy, or even a political psychology, as if the city-state were the appropriate, all-encompassing context. He still took seriously the question: is art really good for us?

But these early controversies raised a number of issues besides the political and generally evaluative one. As the political issue already demonstrates, one important general consideration concerns the relation between artistic and other activities, especially whether such aesthetic activities and reactions always (or never) serve some other-than-aesthetic purpose, whether it is political, or religious, or social (like a "class interest"). Is art, and the artist's ability to direct and excite emotions through imitation and expression, more like a tool with which other ends might be achieved—political, morally educative, or religious—or is there something distinctly aesthetic that we seek in such experiences, for its own sake? Plato and Aristotle might want to consider the role of the tragic poets as a vital element in the political (and especially educational) life of a city-state, and perhaps that was how art (including public monuments, temples, and statues) was experienced by the ancient Greeks, but it could also be claimed that such a context might distort more than it reveals about art's true function in human life, and even Plato and Aristotle might be misreading and so misreporting the actual, classical experience of art (as Friedrich Nietzsche would later argue).

The general controversy about the relative dependence or independence of aesthetic experience became as important and contested an issue as the question that remained at the core of aesthetic reflec-

tion: what is art? And the two are obviously related issues. Since for most of the postclassical and premodern period, the function of art was to be subservient to religion, especially in architecture and music, the nature of such aesthetic experience seemed relatively unproblematic. Distinctions between art and craft were not paramount; imitative success and either pleasure (at the majesty and beauty of divine creation) or a certain sort of pain (awe at the majesty and power of God; anxiety about salvation) seemed clearly the way in which art functioned in its subservient, essentially religious role. But the emergence of a radically new historical period in European civilization, first with the Italian and German and then English Renaissance, and then with the discoveries of the new natural science and the political project of the Enlightenment, also began to affect profoundly the experience of the beautiful and the artistic, and reflective attempts to understand the nature and function of art. With the modern world, the aesthetic dimension came to be understood more and more as essentially *independent*, and as having a distinct sort of *importance* in human life.

To understand fully the altered status of the beautiful in general in modernity, and the different ways in which art came to be appreciated in the modern world, one would have to understand something like the nature of the modern revolution itself, a topic still hotly debated. There is, at least, not much controversy that, at the beginning of the modern period, a settled, aristocratic, hierarchical social and political order based on inherited position and tradition came to an end, that the temporal and spiritual power of organized religion diminished, fragmented, and changed, that a new form of production and economic distribution began to flourish, that democratic control over political institutions and public power grew rapidly, and that human beings, armed with a new scientific method modeled on mathematical physics, began to be able to improve the conditions of their existence and to master nature in ways unimaginable in antiquity. There is certainly still great controversy, though, over how to understand the significance of such wrenching change, what it meant and still means that human history could, in effect, break apart like this (if indeed it did). It would certainly be very surprising if, in the midst of this altered context, human beings would not come to experience the world and their own productions in some different aesthetic way, but the nature of

those differences and the meaning of the beginnings of a genuinely "modern art" are still contested.

For one thing, it is clear enough that the new and ever more authoritative scientific understanding of the natural world would have to alter a great deal in any attempt to understand our delight in the naturally beautiful. If there really is no "great chain of being" or hierarchy of less to more perfect or better being, if the natural world is a stable, eternal world of form that we are inclined by nature to know, then the traditional understanding of the significance of the beautiful—much of which certainly survived and flourished in the Platonism of the Italian Renaissance—could not be defended. If nature was better understood as matter in motion, subject to necessary causal laws, what new explanation could there be for our various and apparently common affective reactions to the natural world in some of its manifestations rather than others?

The first systematic, ambitious, and widely influential attempt to rethink the meaning of the aesthetic in the altered context of modernity was presented in the extraordinary book written by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790. Several of the deep and largely permanent alterations in the modern Western conception of the aesthetic dimension were introduced and defended in that work. In the first place, Kant insisted on the subjective nature of such experience. He argued that although the form of an aesthetic judgment, "this is beautiful," appears to express a standard affirmative assertion ascribing a predicate to an object, beauty cannot possibly be understood as an objective predicate. The new mechanistic natural world of causally interacting particles, which Kant himself had already defended so powerfully as the only sort of objective world we could make true or false claims about, cannot contain "the beautiful" as a natural predicate. Instead, "this is beautiful" must be understood to have as its true or deep grammatical structure, "I am experiencing a certain sort of pleasure in the presence of this object." Beauty must be understood as a distinct *result* of the interaction between the world and our particular cognitive equipment, not as a predicate like "has mass" or "moves at thirty-two feet per second." To experience the beautiful is not to have learned anything about nature; therefore there are not some appreciators who know more than others. To claim that an object is beautiful is only to claim that it gives me pleasure, produces a pleasurable sensation.

But Kant hardly left his analysis at such a subjective and potentially relativistic point. At such a point, one person might find something beautiful, another not, and that would be it; one might express delight at a sunset or a bird's song, another at the smell of cabbage cooking, another at the sight of a dead cow, and given the vast range of individual preferences, backgrounds, and dispositions, "everything would be subjective." But Kant proceeded to argue that even though the ultimate source of aesthetic experience is our own faculties and their interaction, not the nature of the world, this new source has its own kind of authority and claim to legitimacy. One could show, Kant argued, that an aesthetic judgment, if it is a proper aesthetic judgment, possesses a certain claim on all other human beings. Since that claim is not tied to something "in the world" that a person would "miss" by not appreciating the beautiful, the nature of this claim to universality has to be expressed differently. "I am experiencing a distinct sort of pleasure, and aesthetic pleasure" expresses a general claim on the reaction of all others: "*All ought to feel such a pleasure* in the presence of such an object." With great ingenuity and his usual bold originality, Kant proceeded to attempt a "deduction" or general justification of the possibility of such a claim on all others.

The details of such an argument are complex and still much contested. (Kant argued that an aesthetic pleasure is not dependent on any particular sensible constitution or particular interests. It depends only on the disinterested free play of the kind of faculties that *any* human subject must be assumed to possess and so is a reaction that can be rationally expected from any such subject.) But the direction in which Kant sent reflection on aesthetics, what he expressed about how we might understand the beautiful in the altered situation of modernity and why it might still be a profoundly important dimension of human experience, remain influential to this day. First, aside from his most important formulation, about the subjectivity of the beautiful (a claim itself shared in other ways by more empirical, sensualist theories of beautiful, like Francis Hutcheson's, Edmund Burke's, and Lord Kames's), Kant advanced several theses that were to affect a great deal of what came after him. According to Kant, certain natural experiences occasion a kind of delight because we discover that the immediately given sensible elements of our experience present themselves to us in what seems a

kind of *purposive* form, as if somehow the directly sensible world is "suited" to our intellectual need and indeed demand for order and harmony in the world. But this order and harmony must not be a result or function of the application of a normal empirical concept like "flower" or "landscape" or a result of our *making*, that is, imposing order. Our ordering concepts can be satisfied in any number of humdrum ways; but the fact that the independent sensible elements of our experience can occasion a kind of "free play" of our imagination, not directly guided or ordered by a concept, but falling into a kind of free order on their own, is all, in a word, delightful. Such a pleasure, moreover, is not linked to the satisfaction of any clear goal nor tied to any specific interest. (If we do try to make use of some object "for the sake of pleasure" or a specific interest, we will not be experiencing the beautiful, but rather a mere repeatable sensible pleasure, Kant argued.) The world as we directly take it in sensibly seems to fit and suits "on its own" for our intellectual purposes. Nature could have been colorless and monotonous and simply dull. The fact that it isn't so ugly is quite pleasurable and thus, in a distinct sort of way, of great importance for our sense of ourselves.

For Kant also formulated what would be the greatest problem for modern philosophy, the largest question to be answered in the situation created by the scientific revolution. According to that new science, we are just as much parts of the natural world as anything else, subject to necessary causal laws regulating, and rendering in principle predictable, all alteration in time. This new principle makes it exceedingly hard to understand the special sort of respect we want to accord human beings, the dignity we believe that each individual is owed just by being a human being. A great dualism appears to have been bequeathed to us by modernity, between our natural and sensible being on the one hand, and our free, morally responsible being on the other. Kant did not believe a philosophical solution for such a dilemma was possible, but he also insisted that we could not leave the issue as simply a great mystery. Holding ourselves to a standard of individual moral responsibility must make some kind of overall sense, must fit into some sort of whole or general view of things, if we are to be able to keep faith with such a moral destiny.

At this point in his reasoning, the experience of the beautiful emerges as a crucial dimension of Kant's overall philosophy. As we

have seen, Kant located our delight in the beautiful in the fact that the sensible apprehensible natural world is not merely apprehensible as bit and chunks of material wholes. "Apart" from our intellectual ordering and regulating, it exhibits some sort of suitability "for us," for our nonsensible purposes and goals. Kant thought that this was experienced by virtue of the delight occasioned by formal regularities exhibited in our imaginative "free" apprehension. But the most important point he was making involved the dual claim that our capacity to appreciate the beautiful is not subservient to some other sensible end or concrete interest—the beautiful is not a manifestation of something else or reducible to some other sort of pleasure or interest; it is autonomous; and second, this capacity demonstrates that our moral and nonsensible natures are not absurdly adrift in some material, meaningless cosmos. We were in effect demonstrating our transcendence of our material and corporeal natures by such a capacity to appreciate, take such a delight in, such formal, nonmaterial aspects of the natural world.

Such claims about the *subjectivity* of aesthetic experience, and such insistence on the *autonomy of the aesthetic,* came to play essential roles in almost all later modern reflection on the aesthetic dimension. The beautiful was not meant to be understood as a mere means in the service of something else, or a simple psychological pleasure, manifested in a variety of ways by a variety of individuals. The newly liberated bourgeois individual came to consider himself entitled to a pleasure not subservient to the religious or the political or even the sensible, and he could now experience an equally liberated aesthetic dimension. And such an experience came to be quite important: our capacity to appreciate the beautiful could be said to evince a certain *dignity,* moral significance, and even transcendence of the material (and later the commercialized, bourgeois) world.

To be sure, Kant's position would often be left far behind. For one thing, Kant was much more interested in the naturally beautiful; he relegated artworks to a decidedly secondary significance and even seemed slightly suspicious, on moral grounds, of artistic activity not directly linked to the (for him) "original" natural experience of the beautiful. Art*works* of all kinds would quickly assume much more importance than that afforded them by Kant. (Indeed, the Kantian and traditional emphasis on the beautiful in nature would soon lose its hold on the imagination of European modernity.

Perhaps the idea of such a holistic, comprehensive harmony with the natural world began to look naive in the era of modern science and technology. It began to look difficult enough to feel at home with our won constructions and productions. Reconciliation with ourselves and with each other loomed as even more pressing problems.) Pleasure would not long hold pride of place in explanations of the aesthetic, as the experience of the sublime—and a much greater interest in aesthetic reactions of shock, the painful, the uncanny, the mysterious, the horrifying—would come to occupy more central roles in the public life of art, and the political and social function of artworks would come back into prominence as great questions, supplanting to some extent the more metaphysical concerns evident in Kant. Nevertheless, the link that Kant tried to establish between the aesthetic dimension of experience and human freedom, its role in manifesting the fact of our not being sensible, determined creatures, would begin a style of thought and introduce a set of issues that would be constitutive of modern reflections on the significance of the aesthetic.

This was immediately obvious in the extremely influential post-Kantian manifesto written in 1793 by the German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*. In Schiller's hands, many of Kant's ideas were presented without all of the complex links to the general Kantian project in critical philosophy, and were developed and expanded in ways that revealed a great deal about both the aspirations and the anxieties of the new age. For the modern age had announced itself as the age of liberation, and the great persistent question of modernity thus concerned what was also the most important Kantian theme: freedom itself, its nature and the conditions of its realization. The question obviously provoked a number of pressing political responses, and both Kant and Schiller were living through the age of the French Revolution as they wrote their important works. But the familiar idea (persistent despite so much criticism and even what seems to many such manifest implausibility) that the aesthetic dimension of life could make us better people (or could reveal the presence of our better qualities) took a distinct shape in Schiller's work, one greatly influenced by the Kantian understanding of what makes us worthwhile in the first place, or our freedom. It is "through beauty," Schiller was bold enough to say, that "we arrive at free-

dom," and so can realize our "noblest destiny" as moral beings. The idea that the creation of and participation in art could count as the achievement of freedom (by contrast, could establish a kind of resistance to natural and social experiences of necessity) would have a long and complex history thereafter.

Kant had borrowed from Jean-Jacques Rousseau the idea that would become one of the most historically influential ever uttered by a philosopher—that all human beings are worthy of a kind of unqualified respect by virtue of a capacity they all share: the ability to set the course of their own lives as individuals, to be self-determining or autonomous beings. They are entitled to such respect for that reason. Because they have that capacity, no one can be treated as a mere means for anyone else; they are all "ends in themselves." More specifically, such subjects can be considered free because they can deliberate and choose what to do; they can set their ends on the basis of reason, not merely pursue ends set by nature or society. Human reason is, in all persons, capable of determining the principles of action, and persons are capable of acting on such motivation, because such a principle holds for all rational agents. But of course, persons are not exclusively rational agents; they are creatures of sensibility, desire, and passion as well, and act, perhaps most of the time, on the basis of such passions and needs. They in effect allow themselves "to *be* determined"; they allow the course of their lives "to be set" by passions and interests that they do not "set" themselves, and so do not act freely in the fullest sense. Acting in a way that acknowledges the equal claim of all others to determine their own lives as well, and so according to a rational principle, and thereby in a self-determined way, thus came to be understood as a difficult moral ideal as well as an abstract principle.

Given the great power and influence of human passions and the human ego, we might think that the chances for the realization of such an ideal are slim to none. Although Kant himself believed in the possibility of some moral progress, his basic view was that "nothing straight could be made from such a crooked timber" as man, that we would remain "radically evil" (always inclined to give priority to our own case), and that the opposition between our capacity to direct our actions with reason and thereby freely, and our sensuous inclinations, allowed few opportunities for mediation and reconciliation. But Schiller, taking up some of Kant's own ideas

about the symbolic importance of the beautiful, argued that our sensibilities should be understood as elements of a whole harmonious being, not as abstractly opposed to reason, and that when they are understood in this way, we can see how they could, in effect, change, be educated. They are subject to cultural training and habit, and Schiller tried to show that the most powerful vehicle both for evincing such a more harmonious human nature and for such moral education is art itself. There might be an "aesthetic education of mankind."

Schiller was not at all thinking about moralistic literature, or the Aesop's fable, lessons-for-life approach. His point was much more general and concerned the way in which all great art, apart from the issue of subject matter, can both demonstrate and help us experience the potential and real harmony between the ideal, rational, or formal elements of experience and the material or sensible elements. In such an aesthetic dimension, the material marble or sensible words are not simply the bearers of superimposed form, the stuff on which form is impressed; they express such formal elements in a kind of living harmony that Schiller took to be of immense moral as well as aesthetic significance. "Beauty," Schiller claimed, "is freedom in appearance."

On the face of it, there is no particular reason why aesthetic success of this sort—both the ability to embody what we can create in the matter of creation in a kind of seamless harmony, and our engaged, intense experience of such harmony—should have as much moral significance as Schiller insisted. The question of rational self-direction and sensible, egoistic opposition might be only a very general instance of the opposition between ideal and real, of no particular importance for moral experience or moral education. But not only did Schiller's apologia for art make a certain philosophical case; not only was he the first to express so clearly what would become an ardent hope of the emerging European middle classes—that their ever more routinized, regulated, alienated, money-dominated lives might still allow a moment of transcendent personal and universal meaning, a demonstration of higher cultural capacities and a redemption of sorts. The kind of importance that Schiller bestowed on certain elements of aesthetic experience, and the influence his position enjoyed, revealed a general anxiety in the age he addressed. The lack of common consensus about religious values,

and the rapid dislocations, revolutions, and simply the pace of change characteristic of modernity had created a distinct kind of yearning for a sphere of meaning and a sense of importance not fulfilled by the secular standards of political or commercial success allowed by the emerging bourgeois world. That world was the world of "unfreedom," necessity, and control. The aesthetic world, on the other hand, was taken to represent the world of authenticity, integrity, and freedom. In the specific case of Schiller, it could even exhibit both a disinterested liberation from individual or egoistic interests, as well as a kind of reconciliation with such a sensible world. Beautiful art could evince and create a beautiful soul.

We have already seen in this brief survey that part of the answer to such questions as the nature of art, and its importance and value, seem to have a great deal to do with the kind of society in which such art is produced and appreciated. It might be expected that a culture that places a very high value on a kind of civic harmony, or on religious devotion, or on individual freedom and individual moral responsibility, or on commercial success, or on some recovery of meaning and purpose where such direction is experienced as threatened, might in effect turn to its artists with different sets of questions and hopes in such different circumstances. (Like all aesthetic issues, however, this is hardly an uncontroversial assumption and is much debated. Many critics see what is distinctive in all art as certain special formal properties and understand the history of alteration in attention to different properties as wholly internal to art history, as a matter of internal artistic experimentation among artists. Such critics point to our ability to appreciate art from all ages as proof of its formally transcendent nature. Still others, like Theodor Adorno, understand art in terms of its formal properties but see in art's formal properties precisely the locus of its historical and critical meaning.) If anything like such a general assumption about aesthetic social and historical meaning is true, though, it would especially help explain the altered status of the aesthetic realm when the official culture of European modernity began, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, to experience a series of profound crises of self-confidence and purpose.

One philosopher and culture critic above all others is associated with this crisis, Friedrich Nietzsche (who called it the problem of "nihilism"). Nietzsche published his first important book, *The Birth*

of Tragedy, about the role that art, especially music (the opera of Richard Wagner most especially), should play in the light of that purported crisis. The modern secular movement of "enlightenment," Nietzsche claimed, had promised to allow only those claims to authority, whether political, moral, or intellectual, that could be securely defended by reason. This critically self-conscious culture would, so went the promise, allow us to foster a world of rational, self-reliant, diverse individuals, tolerant of each other's diversity and secure in the great universal authority of the claims of reason. Instead, Nietzsche said, such a rational criticism had become an all-encompassing skepticism, and, especially with Kant's philosophy, ultimately so critical even about its own enterprise that it had begun to "devour its own tail" and had produced intellectual confusion and lassitude, not confidence. Socially, instead of a race of self-reliant individuals, the European democratic enlightenment had produced, Nietzsche claimed, a race of timid sheep, conformist, anxious, and vulgar. This intellectual and social crisis amounted to a crisis of value, or the crisis of nihilism, the debilitating sense that "nothing is true; everything is allowed," that "the goal stands missing," that there is nothing worth wanting or striving for.

Nietzsche's early (1870) work, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, is written largely in the form of a philological essay on the historical origins of Greek tragedy. But amid the historical details of his unusual claims about the role of the chorus and music, Nietzsche returned to the "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy begun by Plato. For the first time in the history of Western thought, Nietzsche mounted a stinging attack on the West's greatest intellectual hero, Socrates, all in the name of, or as an advocate of, the tragic poets, especially Aeschylus and Sophocles. (Euripides was treated as already too much under the influence of Socrates' intellectualism.) Socrates was attacked for having created the kind of "false" or "naive" optimism about the possible role of reason and reflection in human life that, for Nietzsche, was to have such fateful consequences throughout the Western tradition. By contrast, "tragedy" was treated by Nietzsche not as a purely aesthetic criterion, but as a kind of ethical category. Tragic drama, treated as paradigmatic for all art, was analyzed not only as expressive of a violent, unstable, creative tension between human attempts at form-giving, clarity, and order (the Apollonian force) and the form-

dissolving, intoxicating, even orgiastic materiality of the Dionysean (an opposition that owes more to Schiller than Nietzsche admits), but also as a powerful non-Socratic answer to the famous, core Socratic question: how should one live? The tragic point of view represented a "tragic pessimism," a kind of strength in the face of the failure of order and individuation and coherence, and affirmation of life in spite of such suffering, and without any appeal to a Socratic sort of "argument" or a rational "answer" to the question of "why life ought to be lived." The question itself, Nietzsche argued, already represented a hatred of life, a Socratic decadence that we need not accept as the necessary starting point of human affirmation.

Nietzsche's position raises many questions, and he himself very soon abandoned the call for a reanimation of the tragic point of view through the operatic music of Wagner. The idea of some failure in the Enlightenment version of modernity seemed to return us to the ancient quarrel and it reraised the question of whether a certain aesthetic stance toward life (or what Nietzsche continued to call an "aesthetic justification of existence") might prove superior in many ways to Enlightenment appeals to reason. Giving such an aesthetic form of sense-making and legitimacy a kind of priority might be truer to the unresolvability and ambiguities of life's tensions and it might provide a better, more adequate "affirmation of life." Such themes not only intensified with what had already proven to be powerful currents of European romanticism, but also helped intensify the enthusiasm in the late modern tradition for a "critical" view of art, for the avant-garde, the "modernist," the anti-bourgeois, and the revolutionary. In many ways, Nietzsche was the first avant-garde philosopher, the first modern philosopher who raised the question of whether he "belonged" in philosophy or in literature, whether he was writing philosophy or performing the parts of various philosophical characters. This was a deliberate confusion on his part, a consequence of his sense that the ascendancy of the Socratic or scientific point of view was over, and that a new era was at least possible, oriented from the creative, experimental, pessimistic but still affirmative potential of the aesthetic, and that he was to be its new "Socrates," the great historical turning point for what we now call such a "postmodern" age.

Of course, Nietzsche's stance is not the only way one might think about the continuity between the fate of art and the fate of the mod-

ern age. For many traditional Marxist critics, for whom artistic style and content were best understood as "ideological" reflections of class relations and class struggle, that is, as means by which ruling classes sought to legitimize themselves and determine the perceptions of others, the proper category of modernist art was also historical, but modernism was understood as "decadent" not liberating (as a reflection of the historically "contradictory" or dead-end or despair-filled state of modern capitalism).

Adorno's position is not crudely reductionist like this, and is connected with a revised new-Marxist analysis of modernity. For theorists like Adorno, the chief characteristic of modern capitalism is not class conflict as such but its enormous success at integrating individuals into its system of social organization, its ability to present a homogenizing and stultifying conformism as simply the neutral rationalizations of bureaucratic, efficient organization, and so its powerful ability to defuse, marginalize, and co-opt all opposition, its totalistic order. He called this the problem of "identity thinking" and, like others already discussed, he treated the aesthetic dimension as a form of negation of, or opposition to, such pervasive identity. ("Art is the social antithesis of society.") Adorno was much more sympathetic to the "negative" political potential in modernist and avant-garde artworks (especially in music), because he thought that the formal experimentation characteristic of such work could break the hold in some way of the dominant canons of rationalization and integration. He accordingly and somewhat paradoxically attributed a serious political importance to the autonomy of the artwork and developed a much more sympathetic social-critical position on modernist art than many other Marxist critics. The existence of art itself, especially formal experimental work, stood as a sign for a great dissatisfaction with reality as it was, for the need of a negation and reworking of social reality, an expression of rejection and negation that could itself have liberating effects.

For a much more optimistic, if nonstandard, modernist like John Dewey, the making and appreciating of all art was indeed connected with modern "experience," but not in the revolutionary or oppositional way suggested by Nietzsche and other avant-gardists, and not in the formally "negative" way proposed by Adorno. Art

should be understood more as a continuous component of ordinary human experience, or understood functionally, in terms of the needs and goals of practical life within which the especially intense, formally ordered experiences of aesthetic appreciation could play their role and so could best be understood. These needs and goals include needs for depth of understanding and subtlety of communication and the stimulation of creative "energy" that art can satisfy, even across widely different historical periods. And finally, for all the differences between Dewey's account and many others here summarized, he ends his treatment with yet another expression of that great, persistent hope that art can make us better, that it can "remake" us, "redirect" our desire, and "insinuate possibilities of human relations not to be found in rules and precept."

Views like these, expressing the fear that art may corrupt us or the hope that art might educate our sensibilities or enrich or even redeem us, also recall a final contrary view, that the era of art's great significance and importance in human life is over, at an end. If the question is "what is the meaning of aesthetic experience—so-called high art or culture aspirations—in the late modern world?" the answer might be "there is no such meaning or role, that such experiences have been fatally marginalized." And if the question is "how might one differentiate genuinely aesthetic experience from the pleasurable entertainment provided by modern advertisers and mass market producers?" the answer might be "such a distinction no longer exists." The authors of these selections and many other philosophers and artists throughout history would clearly regard such a state of affairs as a catastrophe. Whether such a state of affairs has in fact come to pass, and if so, whether that judgment is correct, must be left here as open questions.