



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2017.1.62-66>

## MCDSARE: 2017

# International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

## THE CRITICAL ROLE OF ART FOR MEANINGFUL MORAL ACTION

Anthony Wallace

(a) Northern Arizona University, USA, aw662@nau.edu

### *Abstract*

In the late 18th century, Friedrich Schiller made a case for the importance of art in the individual and for society at large. His argument is made poetically, is devoid of scientific evidence, and is tailored for its 18th century audience. Schiller shows how art has the power to unify society and balance the individual, inspiring action for the apathetic and encouraging rationality in the over-zealous ideologue. Today, our fractured society suffers from both lazy cynicism and emotional fanaticism. In this paper, I attempt to update Schiller's project, showing its relevance today by supporting it with further philosophical argument and contemporary science. Scientific developments in the fields of moral psychology and neuroscience made long after Schiller's life have added credibility to his ideas about the importance of art and how it interacts with human nature. Nearly everyone recognizes the need for unification in our fractured society, and I hope to make the case that art may be the very thing that makes this possible.

**Keywords:** Friedrich Schiller; Art; Ethics; Moral Psychology; Neuroscience; Antonio Damasio;

### INTRODUCTION

In his 1795 essay *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* Friedrich Schiller complains that "utility is the great idol of the age" (Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. 1795,26). He was concerned that society had begun to focus exclusively on those pursuits that are quantifiable at the expense of those that are less so - like art. Over the course of the essay, which is really a book-sized collection of letters addressed to his new patron, he makes a heartfelt and convincing case for the importance of art in society.

This trend that Schiller was concerned with seems as present as ever in our modern society. Today, there is a clear value placed on those skills which most directly affect the 'bottom line' and art is certainly not considered to be one of these. Today, in our age of information overload, ideological political pundits, fake news, deceiving headlines, and a well-publicized "divided" society, art may be the most promising remedy for our problems. It should be more evident today than ever that a more intense barrage of "facts" and "news" is insufficient to inspire sensible action and cohesion amongst the population. There seems to be something missing amongst the modern clutter. We have more talking points than we could have ever dreamed of but we seem to be either completely unable to muster the

energy to act meaningfully or we are so passionately devoted to our dogmatic ideological positions that we are irrational, blindly rejecting the perspective of the other half the world. Information is good, but its acquisition does not necessarily entail meaningful action, for that an additional ingredient is required. Art is essential for individuals and society as a whole. It speaks to and energizes our emotional capacities which are a necessary component for rational, meaningful, and moral action. This is the argument that Schiller made in 1795. This argument, that art is essential for meaningful action in individuals and society as a whole is deeply relevant to our modern world and is supported by personal experience, philosophy, modern neuroscience, and moral psychology.

## **2. IS - OUGHT GAP**

As an undergrad I took a class that focused almost exclusively on Hurricane Katrina. We learned about the faulty construction of the levees, the life and death triage decisions healthcare professionals had to make at hospitals without electrical power, the delayed governmental response, the cutthroat behavior of insurance companies in the aftermath, and the massive attempt to gentrify (or as one politician put it “clean up”) the area after it had been effectively wiped out by the hurricane. There was a clear intellectual recognition of the disturbing nature of these events when I was studying them. I knew that the lack of preparation for the event was irresponsible and that the experience of the victims must have been horrible. I would have gotten all of these questions right if they were posed to me on a multiple choice test, but there was still something missing. My knowledge of these facts and information about the disaster lacked a certain emotional resonance and I remained largely unmoved by them. This state that my class left me in was in no way useless, the new knowledge that I acquired left me with a better understanding of the world, but I was not motivated to take action.

One year after the class, I heard a four-minute poem, “Left,” by Nikki Finney. It was written from the perspective of a survivor and upon hearing it the real emotional truth of the disaster hit me. I felt like I ‘got it’ for the first time. This new understanding is harder to articulate, I did not learn any new tangible facts per se, but I was left with the sense that I could finally begin to empathize with those who had experienced the disaster. Prior to this emotional apprehension of the dilemma, I was apathetic and emotionally disengaged. My understanding was removed and scholarly. I could tell you about what happened and act upset but I did not really care. Disengaged and unconcerned people armed with information have never been those that have made a difference in our world. Insofar as art can convert them into engaged and concerned people with information, it is very valuable indeed.

Many people can relate to the feeling of having ample information but being unable to make a decision. The everyday experiences of people across the world would seem to support the idea that some emotional impetus is required for any kind of meaningful decision. Philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists have been making this claim since at least Aristotle, who stressed the importance of an emotional appeal (pathos) in persuasive speech. David Hume’s “is - ought gap” is an assertion of the categorical divide between fact and feeling. His claim is that there is a fundamental difference between statements about the empirical facts of the world, ‘is’ claims, and moral statements about what we as humans ‘ought’ to do. He contended that no amount of ‘is’ claims, or factual information, is sufficient to infer a claim of the ‘ought’ variety. In order to make a moral judgement, a person’s sentiment must intervene. Only with the force of sentiment may any ‘ought’ claim be made (Hume, 1738).

## **3. JONATHAN HAIDT’S SOCIAL INTUITIONIST MODEL**

More recently, the psychologist Jonathan Haidt developed a theory of moral decision called the Social Intuitionist Model, or SIM. The SIM claims that when confronted with a moral dilemma, we are initially struck with an intuition that informs our initial judgement. It is not until after this initial intuitional judgement that we begin to reason about our conclusion. In this way, our reasoning acts like a lawyer, rationally arguing for a predetermined position. For Haidt, it is possible for our reasoning to loop back and influence our intuition in such a way that it changes our conclusion. Nevertheless, intuition or sentiment is a necessary component in the process of making moral judgements (Haidt, Jonathan 2001). Haidt supports his theory by describing the phenomenon of “moral dumbfounding,” a situation where

people hold moral positions that they have trouble justifying rationally. To illustrate this phenomenon, Haidt presents a scenario where a brother and sister have sex. They are on vacation from college and use two forms of birth control, they enjoy the experience and believe that it brings them closer, but decide to never repeat it and keep it as a special secret. Most people are immediately repulsed by the story and are quick to judge it as wrong. However, when people are asked to describe the rationale behind their judgement, they often cite risks of inbreeding and psychological harm to the siblings. When they are reminded that these problems do not apply to this situation, they sometimes conjure up even less relevant rationale or they simply admit they have ‘no good reason, it’s just wrong.’ This case seems to suggest that an “anti-incest intuition” is what is really at the heart of the subjects’ judgement of this case. It seems to follow that in a world where a “pro-incest intuition” was more common, people would have the opposite feelings about this case (Bjorklund, Fredrik, and Jonathan Haidt 2000).

#### **4. ANTONIO DAMASIO'S CASE STUDY OF ‘ELLIOT’**

There is a famous case in neuroscience that involves a standup family man and father named Elliot who developed a brain tumor that necessitated a removal of a significant amount of his brain tissue. When Elliot awoke from surgery, he was suddenly incapable of making decisions. Even the most mundane dilemmas (what to eat, what to wear) debilitated Elliot. He understood the rational elements of his various predicaments perfectly, but was unable to move himself to make a choice. He could even discuss complex political affairs and when presented with hypothetical scenarios about the lives of others, could prescribe a course of action that would lead one to happiness. Tragically though, he was unable to apply his sound reasoning to his own life. He fell victim to investment scams and went bankrupt, he was unable to hold a steady job, he cheated on his wife and after she divorced him he married a prostitute.

The Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio studied Elliot’s case in detail and concluded that the tissue he lost in his surgery was directly responsible for Elliot’s total collapse. While removing his tumor, Elliot’s surgeons essentially severed the connection between his limbic system (the emotional center of the brain) and his frontal lobes (the rational center of his brain). This left Elliot's ability to reason and to feel intact but made it impossible for these two capacities to influence each other. This lack of internal communication debilitated Elliot to the point where he was not functioning as a person. He is evidence that without a healthy interplay of reason and emotion we seem to lose our humanity, meaningful human action depends on both (Damasio, Antonio R. 1995). Hume, Haidt, and Elliot all support the idea that reason alone is insufficient for coherent human behavior. Hume claims that moral decision-making is simply impossible without sentiment. Haidt suggests that moral decisions necessarily involve an emotional intuition which further reasoning can better inform. Elliot shows that a person without a healthy line of discourse between his reason and emotion is unable to function and becomes a slave to impulse. All meaningful decisions humans make involve both emotion and reason. Without both of these components working properly or to an appropriate degree, we are out of balance and unable to function properly. This is essentially the claim that Schiller makes when he says that only when both components of a person are active is a person’s “humanity established.” (Schiller. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 96). In this situation, “they both lose their sanction, and the opposition of two necessities gives rise to freedom” (Schiller. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 96). Freedom and true human flourishing is found in a place where both of these forces are working in harmony.

#### **5. STEM INVESTMENT IN THE MODERN WORLD**

Today, more than ever there is a premium being placed on the acquisition of skills that are quantifiable and belong to the rational sphere. This is evident in the emphasis being placed on and the resources being poured into STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields. It is believed by many that the proficiency of our population in these fields is the key to advancing technologically and maintaining our country’s position as a dominating world power. Between 1987 and 2007, over 200 acts of legislation containing the term “science education” were introduced to congress. Federal investment in STEM fields is estimated to be between \$2.8 and \$3.4 Billion annually (Gonzalez, Heather and Jeffrey J. Kuenzi. 2012, 3). As our interest in STEM fields has been increasing, our interest in art has been decreasing. Studies show that American attendance of live art events has been steadily declining. In 1992

over 40% of Americans reported attending a live art event, by 2012 that number had fallen to 30% (Silber, Bohne, and Tim Triplett.2015). Federal funding for art education is estimated at \$250 million/year, less than 10% of STEM investment (Gonzalez and Kuenzi. 2012). It is commonly known that when schools need to make financial cuts, it is often art programs that are the first to go. Ironically, in the Congressional Research Service report that advocates for further investment in STEM and contains the statistics referenced in this paper, there is a quote by George Washington, presumably included to make the point that an emphasis on science education has been a national priority from day one: “Nor am I less persuaded that you will agree with me in opinion that there is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science *and literature*” (Gonzalez, Heather and Jeffrey J. Kuenzi. 2012, 1). It seems that Schiller and Washington alike recognized that balance is important, advocating for both science and literature.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In the case of Elliot, it was made clear that an inability for our emotional and rational capacities to interact in a healthy interplay results in an incoherent life that is subjected to irrational whims of emotion and biology. While there is no overwhelming force controlling Elliot, he certainly does not possess a satisfying freedom. There are not many people in our society with disconnected frontal lobes, but there are many who seem to suffer from an abundance of emotional motivation. This phenomenon is especially evident during election season. People emphatically cling to their ideological positions and selectively filter information that threatens their emotionally charged ideas. When people are intentionally ignoring information, the prescription for their dysfunction cannot be more information. Schiller stresses that art, with the ability to convey beauty and drive people toward a balanced and ideal state, is not evangelical rather, “it interferes with no business either of reflection or resolution, it confers on both merely the capacity, but determines nothing concerning the use of this capacity” (Schiller. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 108.). It does not attempt to provide the consumer with clear conclusions like most politically charged TV shows and websites, but rather it inspires the consumer to be a more complete, free, and harmonious person - to make their own choice. It is unlikely that the overzealous ideologue can be moved to a more humble state through reasoning alone. It is hard to imagine any sort of traditional conversation or news article really penetrating their firm disposition. It is easier to imagine, however, that in the midst of an honest reading of Camus’ *The Stranger* this person could be deeply softened when she reads, “I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world.”

The fanatic ruled by emotion seems to have the opposite problem that I had following my academic Hurricane Katrina class. In my case, apathy was the problem. However, like the fanatic, I would not have benefitted from any additional information. It took a beautiful poem to finally drive me to connect a sufficient emotional feeling to the information I already knew about Katrina. Humankind has consistently suffered from a lack of a true understanding of the plights of those who belong to different social groups. Artists like Tupac, Banksy, and Beyonce are particularly concerned with inspiring feeling in society that will lead to positive change. Each of these artists, and many more, recognize that the most effective way of spreading their message is through the medium of art. They understand that simply leaving ideas in our heads is ultimately unsatisfying. As humans, we feel a need to actually see our thoughts and passions realized in the world, we strive for them to come to fruition. Not only is Tupac doing this when he creates music, but he is inspiring others to do the same. The apathetic person is in need of inspiration to put into action their stagnant ideas, art can give them this energy. When we are presented with an idea through the medium of art, we do not just come to know it, we feel it. This total apprehension of a thing is necessary for us as people to both feel complete and harmonious within ourselves and to take any meaningful action that can better the world.

Friedrich Schiller was a poet and his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* could rightly be considered a work of art. He relies on no scientific theories or studies to develop his position. His message is conveyed with a healthy balance of passionate language and rational argument. This combination proves to be effective for communicating the importance of art in a powerful and timeless way. Today, our society feels like it is fracturing and fragmenting, forming deep valleys between its

pieces. Many people are uninterested in gaining a well-rounded and wise understanding of our world, while many others feel hopeless and apathetic. Art has the capability to be a unifying force for society. It has a way of conforming its effect to the needs of the individuals that experience it. It energizes the apathetic, calms the overzealous, and brings into harmony both the individual and the society as a whole.

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