

Can Art for Art's Sake Imply Ethics? Henry James and David Jones

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As pointed out by Habermas in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1990, pp.17-19) modernity is characterized by an understanding of the spheres of ontology, aesthetics, and ethics, as separate, and Kant's assertion that art can be seen as 'purposeless purposiveness' was followed by the late nineteenth-century aestheticist movement declaring the motto 'art for art's sake', developments which on the surface could be taken as indicating that there is no connection between aesthetics and ethics. I shall be arguing, however, that it is possible not to reject the 'art for art's sake' stance, but, nevertheless, to understand artistic activity as having ethical implications. To do this I shall concentrate on the sacramental theory of art, as expounded by the twentieth-century modernist poet, post-impressionist artist, and theorist, David Jones. I shall introduce my analysis of Jones' theory by suggesting, through a novel of Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, that 'art for art's sake' rhetoric can, if ambiguously, imply an ethical and even religious stance, and shall follow my section on Jones with an attempt to show how his theory of art can be understood in the light of the neo-Aristotelian theory of ethics propounded by contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. My aim will be to argue that a view of art as a non-utilitarian activity does not preclude an ethical understanding of its role in life.

In his novel, *The Tragic Muse*, first published in its entirety in 1890, Henry James writes about one of the themes, which constantly preoccupied him, about what art is and what it is to be an artist. The novel could be described as a *Künstlerroman* (a novel about an artist, or artists), and is one of many he wrote.

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His interest often focuses more on the artistic way of life than on artistic production, as, for example, the extreme case of *The Sacred Fount*, in which the protagonist, who is a novelist, is shown, not producing any work, but imagining, and possibly intervening in, social relations at a country house party. Out of the three heroes in *The Tragic Muse*, one, Nick Dormer, a practicing painter and one, Miriam Rooth, an actress, the third, Gabriel Nash, is an aesthete, who has written one book, and then given up any obviously productive artistic activity, but becomes a theorist of art, and functions as the theoretical mouthpiece of the novel, mentoring the other two, and encouraging them to live the artistic life to the best of their abilities. While many critics have seen Gabriel Nash as a caricature of the late nineteenth century aestheticist, or 'art for art's sake', movement,¹ I would argue that Nash represents James' own view that the purest artistic life need not be productive, especially if production implies compromising on aesthetic ideals for the sake of an audience. Nash's art resides in his style of living, rather than in any production.² On the other hand, Nick Dormer and Miriam Rooth both finish the novel as productive artists (in painting and the theatre), but the art they produce seems compromised by social factors, and to prevent them from developing personally at a high artistic level – Nick Dormer ends the novel painting society portraits, and Miriam finds herself exhausted by endless repeats of the same play.³ Nash's theorizing on art, expressed especially in conversation with Dormer (the painter, whom Nash persuades to pursue painting rather than politics), is characterized by religious and ethical language used to present art as a religious cult. For example, Nash talks of persuading Dormer to pursue painting as 'saving' Dormer: 'We shall save him yet', he tells Dormer's sister (James, 1995, p.360), and early in the novel he describes the location of the Salon as a 'temple' of the 'gods' (James, 1995, p.30).⁴ Eventually this kind of language spreads beyond Nash himself, with Miriam Rooth, the actress, describing her admirer Peter Sheringham's dilemma, over whether to dedicate himself to supporting the theatre (and her) or to his diplomatic career, in the following Biblical terms: 'He's trying to serve God and Mammon' (James, 1995, 418). So in the novel the language used to describe the artistic life presents it as a kind of religion, and the decision as to whether to follow one's artistic calling is talked of as a kind of ethical decision. While the seriousness of this language in the context of the novel is open to dispute, given the possibility that it is meant as a parody by James, and the meaning of art as religion is ambiguous, even if seriously meant (it is not clear what spiritual meaning, if any, is implied), nevertheless the possibility that an aestheticist attitude to art could imply a consciousness of some sort of duty of the artistic individual in relation to art, is raised, and thus the conceivability of a kind of ethics arising from an 'art for art's sake' attitude to art. In the case of *The Tragic Muse*, aesthetic ethics, if it exists, comes into conflict with an alternative, social ethics, the ethics of getting on in society of the time –

¹ See, for example, Winner, 1970, pp.46, 123.

² Winner, 1970, p.122, sees Nash as cultivating himself as an art object.

³ Treitel, 1996, pp. 54-8 describes the ways in which Dormer's and Rooth's artistic activity is presented as unsuccessful.

⁴ See also Horne, 1995, pp. xiii-xiv on religious language used about art in the novel.

Dormer and Rooth compromising with the social ethics, while Nash stays true to the aesthetic ethics – but the ethical and religious rhetoric present in the book is all in the service of the aesthetic ideal.

David Jones was an early and mid-twentieth century poet, who wrote two major works: *In Parenthesis*, about his experiences on the Western front during the First World War, and *The Anathemata*, a kind of cosmic epic poem, describing the cultural history of Britain in a European and also soteriological context. He also engaged in visual art, such as water-colour painting, engraving and calligraphy, as well as writing essays on subjects such as the early history of Britain, and art theory. Drawing particularly on his essay 'Art and Sacrament', but also on other writings of his, I shall try to show how his theory, while partly admitting the premises of the 'art for art's sake' movement, finds a way to explain art as a basic human activity, one which is defining of what it is to be human, and which human beings must engage in if they are to live as humans. The fundamental points of Jones' theory are that art is a non-utilitarian sign-making activity, and that as such it is analogous to religious sacrament.

In his essay 'Art and Sacrament' Jones lays the philosophical groundwork for the argument he is going to make by introducing the distinction, from ancient and medieval philosophy, between transitive and intransitive activity, transitive activity being activity immediately directed to an external end, and intransitive activity being independent of an immediate external end. Transitive activity is thus utilitarian activity, whereas art comes under the heading of the intransitive (which he also describes as gratuitous). In declaring art's belonging to the category of intransitive activity, Jones is able to endorse the aestheticist position to the extent that the 'art for art's sake' doctrine is understood as meaning that art is an intransitive activity, not directed to any immediate external end, while he suggests that the aestheticist formula is more 'open to misinterpretation' (Jones, 1973a, p.149) than the ancient-scholastic distinction. He goes on to make the argument that art, which he understands as sign-making, is the defining activity for human beings, the activity which only they, and no other kind of creature, can perform – animals cannot perform it due to their lack of ability to engage in intransitive, gratuitous activity, and incorporeal beings (angels) cannot because of their lack of a physical nature (Jones, 1973a, pp.149-50). Part of Jones' argument is to introduce the notion of the virtue 'prudentia', that virtue which allows practical but non-determined decision-making, to associate this quality with art-making, and to view it as definitive of humans in contrast to other animals (Jones, 1973a, pp.145-50, 167). Jones asserts that sign-making, or sacramentality, is natural to humans, or how God created them to be (Jones, 1973a, pp.165-6) – thus any kind of human being, with any philosophical or religious affiliation, cannot help committing sacramental, or sign-making acts ('But sign and sacrament are to be predicated not of some men and their practices but of all men and their practices' Jones, 1973a, p.166), even if it is making a cake for a birthday, or sending a rose to a beloved (Jones, 1973a, pp.164, 167). Jones's argument culminates, in 'Art and Sacrament', with a description of a how a painting (he uses Hogarth's *Shrimp Girl* as

his example) makes a reality in the artist's mind really present in the painting under the form of paint, in a way analogous to the Catholic theory of sacraments, in which a spiritual reality is really present under material forms. However, in terms of the possibility of an ethics deriving from his view of art, Jones explores the idea that art is connected with a kind of obligation, which he describes as 'religio' (Jones, 1973a, p.158), but it is an obligation which implies a freedom at the same time, and which gives rise to the possibility of judgment, 'and the 'virtue of art' is said to be 'to judge'.' (Jones, 1973a, p.160) He is talking here of a kind of obligation internal to art, however, as he stresses, in contrast to any considerations of the uses to which the art might be put (Jones, 1973a, p.161) – the obligation is one towards 'the excellence of the art, or fitting together' (Jones, 1973a, p.151), which he talks of earlier in the essay. Jones expresses the fear, towards the end of the essay, that in modernity, humans are exposed to social, cultural and technological conditions which militate against their natural urge to intransitive activity, and lead them to be less able to interpret such activity, and therefore art, leading to alienation (Jones, 1973a, p.178), a fear he expands on in the follow-on essay to 'Art and Sacrament', 'The Utile', which explains the qualities of those utilitarian, non-signifying objects, which he sees as characteristic of contemporary 'technocracy' (Jones, 1973b, pp.181-2).

In the preface to his long poem *The Anathemata*, Jones mentions another aspect of his understanding of art which could be seen as bringing with it ethical implications. This is the 'bardic' role of the poet (and this conception could be extended to the role of other kinds of artist), who creates works which embody the culture of the society within he/she operates, works which are an anamnesis of that culture, in which it is really present (cf. Jones, 1972, pp.20-1). Jones sees this role as still being the role of the poet even in a society which does not specifically recognize it, and which inclines towards utilitarian rather than symbolic concerns. However, the bardic role leads to a responsibility on the bard, more difficult to exercise in a utilitarian society, and that is a concern to discover the 'valid sign' (Jones, 1972, p.27), the sign which conveys associations shared by the artist and his/her audience – 'And' writes Jones 'that desire is ... incumbent upon all who practice an art.' (Jones, 1972, p.27) Jones' long poem, *The Anathemata*, for example, can be seen as his own attempt to fulfill the bardic role for British society, making its culture present to it in a poetic work, using the material that he can, the material familiar to him. It may be due to a sense of a kind of ethical responsibility, in relation to the validity of the signs he uses in the poem, their capacity to signify to his audience as well as to him, that he provides his own extensive footnotes for the poem.

So David Jones' theory of art can be seen as opening up the possibility of ethical concerns following from what art is in a number of ways. One way is through the fact that for Jones artistic activity is what is distinctively human about humans, therefore, to be what they are meant to be, or to fulfill their nature, human beings must practice art. A second way is that art is an activity which contains its own standards and excellences, and which demands a kind of virtue, identified by Jones

as the practical virtue of prudence (in the ancient or medieval sense), of the person practicing art. A third way is that art is a social function, and the artist produces works which contribute to the making real and present of a society's culture, a task which entails a responsibility to perform it validly, using signs which accomplish the task, achieving a remembrance, or anamnesis, of cultural associations, for the artist and the society. Jones did not write extensively about moral philosophy, so I would like to continue the argument by showing how the suggestions in Jones' work on the ethics of art could be made sense of within a moral philosopher's framework. I shall use the philosophy of the contemporary neo-Aristotelian ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre. Jones' and MacIntyre's conceptual frameworks are compatible, drawing as they both do, in part, from the scholastic, and especially, Thomist, tradition.

MacIntyre's project has been to revive virtue ethics, the virtues being the basis of, for example, Aristotle's and Aquinas' treatments of ethics. He began this project with the famous 1981 study *After Virtue*, in which he argued that all attempts to establish a basis for ethics since the Renaissance had been unsuccessful, therefore the traditional virtues-based system needed to be re-established. MacIntyre's understanding of the virtues is that they are those qualities required of a person to participate in and contribute to the development of a specific activity, or practice, which has its own standards, and that the pursuit of excellence in all these activities adds up to human flourishing (see, for example, Chapter 14 'The Nature of the Virtues', MacIntyre, 1985, pp.181-203) – in *After Virtue* MacIntyre discusses, as examples of practices with their own internal standards and telos, and which require virtues of its participants, chess playing and portrait painting (MacIntyre, 1985, pp.188-9). So MacIntyre's understanding of ethics is teleological, and the excellences internal to specific practices are subsidiary telos to the overall telos of human flourishing. MacIntyre also argues that ethics is a practical rationality with its own rational discourse (see, for example, Chapter VIII 'Aristotle on Practical Rationality' and Chapter XI 'Aquinas on Practical Rationality and Justice', MacIntyre, 1988, pp.124-145, 183-208).

MacIntyre's ethical scheme fits into Jones' artistic theory in a number of ways. Jones' art is a specific practice, with its own internal standards, of the type MacIntyre talks of, and Jones even mentions a specific virtue, *prudentia*, which is prominent in the Aristotelian account, as discussed by MacIntyre, in the form of *phronesis*, the intellectual virtue which judges as to when the other virtues are to be exercised (see Jones, 1973a, pp.154, 182-3) – for Jones it is the virtue which allows the artist to judge as to what excellence in a particular art work requires. Both MacIntyre and Jones think teleologically, in that virtue is directed towards excellence in practices. Both believe that virtues are accompanied by a process of practical reasoning, which leads to choices as to what it is right to do in pursuit of excellence in the domain of a practice. Jones theory however has an extra element compared with MacIntyre's, in that for MacIntyre an assembly of diverse practices in which humans engage, and aim for excellence, constitutes the human good, and the flourishing of these practices is human flourishing, whereas Jones

privileges art as being the characteristic human activity, therefore for Jones, flourishing in a truly human sense is the pursuit of artistic activity, artistic activity for Jones subsuming any gratuitous signifying activity.

In this paper I have explored whether the seeming contradiction between the 'art for art's sake' doctrine, and a vision of art connected with ethics, can be bridged, and have suggested that it can be bridged, depending on the type of ethics with which one attempts to connect art. An aestheticist attitude has a tendency to portray art in religious terms, as a way of life, as I have used Henry James' arguably parodic portrayal of such an attitude to illustrate. This attitude could be understood as replacing religion and morality with art, but need not be. I have used David Jones' writings to show that the aestheticist doctrine can be regarded more as a protest against the subordination of art to utilitarian priorities, than as a proclamation that art is outside any kind of morality. Jones emphasizes the gratuitous, non-utilitarian nature of art, but, in his account, the very fact that art is an autonomous field of activity, or a form of life, implies that it has its own internal aims and excellences, its own standards which imply an ethics of its own, springing from inside its own complex, not imposed from the outside. This ethics internal to art takes on all the more importance if, as Jones argues, it is art, understood broadly as sign-making activity, which is the characteristic activity of the human, that which allows humans to be fully human. I have introduced MacIntyre's theory of the virtues to show that an overall theory of ethics exists (and is contemporary), which views virtues arising from specific activities as a large part of what ethics, in general, is, such that the ethics arising internally to art is not a special case, being not normal ethics, but is a case of what ethics is. I would thus conclude that an 'art for art's sake' theory of art, to the extent that it is a theory which regards art as an intransitive, non-utilitarian human activity, is compatible with an ethics, if it is a virtue-based ethics, which describes ethics as springing from within a human practice.

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