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Value of Art vs. Value of Human Life

1 Introduction

What it is that makes us think art is important? Is it some kind of intrinsic value, or does art get its value only through appreciation by humans? And in either way, can an artwork be more valuable than a human life?

This appears to be a very controversial question, as proven in a discussion in our class. For some people it seems really obvious and out of question that certain artworks are more valuable than human lives. Most of the students, however, are convinced that there is no way that a piece of art can be more important than human life. And it did not seem like there were many positions or beliefs in between.

Be that as it may, "The Fire in the Louvre"—one example case—will provide the ground for this essay's topic. It goes as follows:

The Louvre is on fire. You can save either the Mona Lisa or the injured guard who had been standing next to it—but not both. What should you do?¹

It is easy to think of many variations of this case, such as: the guard is already unconscious, or really old, so it is safe to assume he would only live a few more years, if so at all. Or, what if it is

¹ Battin, Margaret P, John Fisher, Ronald Moore, Anita Silvers, *Puzzles about Art. An Aesthetic Casebook*, New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1989. P. 157.

not a guard but a thief, who might even have set the fire in order to escape.

In order to amplify and answer this example case, I will try to identify the value of art and its origin, as well as the value of human lives and its origin.

2 Different ways of ascribing value

As indicated in the introduction, the idea of art having an *intrinsic value* is one possibility of ascribing value to an artwork. This idea might be better known as "Art for art's sake". Another way to go is the hedonistic approach, which basically claims that the value of an artworks consists in the satisfactions of our senses; in how much pleasure it causes us. A third account is the moralistic or platonistic one. Plato claimed that the value of art depends on its good or bad moral consequences. And the last account I will present here, is the intellectualistic view.

In this essay, I will shortly introduce these four accounts, in order to show that there are many ways of analyzing art and attributing value to it. However, my focus will lie on the idea of art as having intrinsic value. This is because I think that intrinsic value, if there exists such a thing at all, is the strongest and most compulsory value of all possible values. However, this does not mean that the other approaches are meaningless or wrong. I just claim that accounts such as the hedonistic one, the moralistic/platonistic one the intellectualistic one ascribe only relative value to an work of art. In the following I will explain why this is so.

2.1 Hedonistic Approach

Hedonism starts from the premise that humankind is driven by only two mighty sovereigns: *pain* and *pleasure*.² This means, whatever humans do, they do it in order to avoid

² Moore, Andrew, "Hedonism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta

pain and to experience pleasure. Pleasure includes things such as euphoria, gladness, joy, love, satisfactory, and so on. Pain, on the other hand, is caused by feelings like ache, terror, irritation, horror, despair, etc. An artwork, according to this interpretation, has value if it causes the viewer to feel pleasure. In case of an abstract painting this might mean that the artist just delightful colors, harmonic shapes and forms, and so forth. Literature with hedonistic value is written in a way that allows the reader to relate to characters or happenings, that triggers positive feelings — the reader might be happy for a character, might be entertained, be taught a moral, or the novel or poem just simply makes him laugh.

Without going into more detail, it becomes clear that this account ascribes art an *external* value. The value is observer-dependent. Everything about the observer is relevant. If someone like darker colors, he will not like a picture that only includes yellow and white. If he is not very experienced he might not even recognize "harmonic shapes". And what about people that enjoy things that do not match the norm. Someone who enjoys pain and death, for example. Since there is obviously an endless amount of possibilities, penchants, individual experiences, etc., etc., it is not possible to create an artwork that pleases everyone the same way. The value is ascribed from the individual observer and his background to the work of art. One living prove for this account is the branch of industrial arts. Everything that can be described as decorative, for example, or actual practical things that get designed to be not only functional but also nice to look at. The question is, if this is really what we consider art. Since it gets mass-produced, it loses its unique and meaningful character. So, in the case of the Mona Lisa, the painting has value *if* the way it was drawn pleases the eye, the colors work nicely together, etc. and it would improve the atmosphere if someone displayed it in his living room or similar.

(ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/hedonism/>>.

2.2 Moralistic/Platonic Approach

As the term reveals already, this concept goes back to Plato. In short, Plato splits art into two categories. Good and bad art - in relation to a moral system. If art has a negative influence on the observer/reader, in a way that makes him question authority, common beliefs and attitudes the society is based on, then, according to Plato, it does not have value, or in other words: it is *bad* art. He actually goes so far to exclude this kind of "art" from the city he is founding in his *Republic*.³ The embodiment of the negative aspect of art for Plato is certainly the *mimesis* idea. It can be understood as the imitation of nature. Nature, in this context means "the totality of all things that are not human artifacts."⁴ Plato argues that people can get deceived by imitation. Someone can paint a picture of a carpenter without knowing anything about him or his craft, however, if he is a good artist, the picture might be so well painted that people think they are looking at a real carpenter. The point is, if someone only imitates, he will never get to the core or the *essence* of things. *Good* art, however, is supposed to have the opposite effect on humankind. It should motivate them to have a good life and to become better moral persons. Plato demands that an artist, who wants to be considered as creating good and valuable art, should be a person that is able to detect and recognize the true nature of the beautiful.⁵

For the Mona Lisa example, this means the following. The Mona Lisa is a valuable work of art only if it, for example, does not only portrait a woman, or in other words, does not only imitate the appearance of a woman, but depicts it in a way that people can learn from it, or get motivated to live a (more) virtuously life. It could, for instance, portrait not a specific woman but

3 Pappas, Nickolas, "Plato's Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/plato-aesthetics/>>.

4 Rader, Melvin, Bertram Jessup, *Art and Human Values*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976. P. 147.

5 Cf. ibid., p. 149.

the idea of a perfectly beautiful woman.

2.3 Intellectualistic Approach

According to this view, the only purpose of art is *truth*. The intellectualistic theory even "denies the existence of anything else in art worthy of attention expect ideas or truth."⁶ This seems to need further explanation. It is easy to imagine how a novel or a movie can present ideas or even truth, but how can music or (abstract) art do so? Henry G. Hartmann sums the concept of being true or false up as follows: "Truth in its strictest meaning implies a reference of an idea to some standard whereby its held that, when they agree we have truth, and when they disagree, error."⁷ Edward Read, an English poet and critic, once wrote:

In the end I do not distinguish science and art, expect as methods, and I believe that the opposition created between them in the past has been due to a limited view of both activities. Art is the representation, science the explanation — of the same reality.⁸

This quote sums up the idea of the intellectualistic theory in one sentence. Art is as important as science and has as much truth value as science does. The only difference is that science presents truth in the form of the abstract judgment, and art in the form of the concrete image or example. In the case of a play or a book this would mean the following. The story that is told, the characters that are involved, etc., do not necessarily need to be real, however, it is important that the events and the characters in the story *may* exist or *could* be real.

In the Mona Lisa case this would mean that the painting is valuable because it shows a woman that could actually be a real woman, with real features, emotions, right proportions and so forth.

⁶ Hartmann, Henry G., *Aesthetics: A Critical Theory of Art*, Columbus: R. G. Adams & Co., 1919. P. 119.

⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

⁸ Rader, Art and Human Values, cited from: *Education Through Art*, New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1943, p. 11.

2.4 Intrinsic Value

The introduced theories so far all ascribed external value to works of art. That means either by comparing it to reality, by triggering feelings in the observer or by its effect on people's moral behavior. The idea of intrinsic value, however, is different. "The intrinsic value of something is said to be the value that that thing has 'in itself,' or 'for its own sake,' or 'as such,' or 'in its own right.'"⁹ So, in other words, intrinsic value has to be seen as something that is already part of something, in this case, of an artwork. It has to be something like a property that is attached to the artwork, independently of anything or anyone that acknowledges it, or first ascribes the value to it.

The Mona Lisa, therefor, only has positive value if there is something about the painting, some indefinable property, that makes it "good", even if nobody ever sees it, and even if the painting would be the only thing that exists in the world.

3 Critique

As mentioned earlier, the focus of this paper lies on the idea of intrinsic value. I will shortly explain why. I introduced four theories about value of things in general, or in specific, artworks. Three of them, the hedonistic, the moralistic/platonistic and the intellectualistic, are *ascribing* value to an object, whereas the idea of intrinsic value assumes that certain objects already have some kind of value, which is inseparable from the object and independent from the existence of anything else. So, since in the first three cases, value only gets attributed, it has not only a subjective character, it can also be replaced. If someone values a painting, for example, for

⁹ Zimmerman, Michael J., "Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>>.

its colors, or its shapes, it can simply be reproduced by the same or another artist who knows about the techniques used and who knows what value was attributed to the painting. This does not only work for the hedonistic theory, it also works in a comparable way for the moralistic and the intellectualistic account. Intrinsic value, on the other hand, is part of an artwork, it cannot just be reproduced because it does not simply get ascribed to an object. The question is, can we even tell what intrinsic value *is*? In order to answer this question, G. E. Moore introduced a thought-experiment. He suggests to imagine an object in a complete isolation, and if we judge it to be "good", then it has to be something with intrinsic value. However, I do not intend to amplify what intrinsic value is or could be, because I am claiming that there is no such a thing a intrinsic value.

I agree with Moore's thought experiment and I think this is a good way of determining what intrinsic value is, but I think, all this experiment shows is, that we either cannot tell, or, which is more likely, that there is no intrinsic value in general. Even if we imagine something in a complete vacuum, there is still one aspect we cannot get rid of, and this is ourselves. So, this might be a very theoretical way of determining what intrinsic value is, but it is not possible to realize it in practice. As long as a human mind, that is not completely free of experience, moral beliefs, and a judgmental attitude is involved, there is no way of telling if there is such a thing as intrinsic value.

Another question is, how can there even be isolated, intrinsic value? Where does it come from? And does the term "value" itself not presuppose that it is valuable for somebody, for something and for some reason? I looked the term up in several dictionaries, and all of them say something like: valuable is something that is important, worth something, or useful. Importance,

worthiness, usefulness, and whatever else could describe value, is always directed at something. Something is important, worthwhile or useful for someone, in respect of a goal, a belief, a desire, etc. Something that exists in complete isolation does *not* have any value, because it cannot be set into any context. One advocate of this general idea is Judith Jarvis Thomson, an American moral philosopher and metaphysician, she claims that "whatever is good is good in some way; nothing can be 'just plain good.'"¹⁰

4 Value of Human Life

So far I have shown in which ways and for what reasons we can ascribe value to artworks. I also, hopefully, have shown why things cannot have intrinsic value. I argue here that the same principles can be applied to humans and human life in general.

The hedonistic theory is applicable since it is possible, and also seems to be common practice, to like people just for the fact that they bring us pleasure in some way. It might be fun to be around them, they might make us feel welcomed, they make us laugh, they care, or whatever other reason one can think of. And on the other hand, we avoid being with people that cause us physical or mental pain. This means, people and their lives can be valuable to us or not.

The moralistic/platonic approach, as well, is applicable to human life. People can be valuable to a single person or an entire community simply through their "good" influence; people that could be called role model's (in a moral way). A preacher or similar is a very good example for this approach. However, it does not need to be a religious person or a religious message he proclaims. Modern preachers usually send out moral messages, they explain why it is the right thing to help someone in need, why it is wrong to lie, and so forth. He motivates people to have a

10 Ibid.

better life and to become useful and good members of a community. Of course, this works in a smaller framework to. It can just be a regular person who always gives you good, moral advice and makes you feel like you need to listen and consider his advice, etc. And again, on the other hand, someone who exerts bad influence over other people, convinces them to do things that are bad for them or the community, or the greater good, are considered less valuable.

The last theory, the intellectualistic one, is a little bit more difficult to apply to human life. There, nonetheless, is a way that I think could work. It is ascribing value to a person that is authentic. This means, the person does not play a role, does not try to make people think that she is different from the way she actually is, or that she thinks differently than she actually does, and so on. She basically always shows her *true* character. At this point, I am not exactly sure, if this is only applicable to morally good people. There could be a person that continuously steals from other people or continuously treats his fellow men badly, but at the same time, this person could always be honest about it; or in other words: authentic. He lets people know, he does not lie or deceive them, everyone around him would know, that he would steal their money if he gets the chance to. So, according to the definition of the intellectualistic theory, this bad person probably has the same value as the good authentic person. I admit, this is not necessarily something that is worth aiming at. But this is not a thread, since it can mean at least two things. First, the intellectualistic theory is not completely accurate, or I just misinterpreted it. Both possibilities do not jeopardize the overall goal of this essay. Furthermore, it is not very likely that such a (bad authentic) person exists at all, since other people would not tolerate him, neither for his actions themselves nor for his honesty and authenticity.

5 Conclusion

So far, I have demonstrated that if it comes to ascribing value, artworks and human life are somehow comparable. And even though I separated the different theories, this does not mean that they cannot apply to one single object or person at the same time. Notwithstanding, there is one important distinction. Human life, usually has more value to (other) people than objects do. This has several reasons. Most importantly, humans have feelings, and since we are social beings¹¹, it usually is harder to harm another human being than an object, such as an artwork. This is also because a person usually has friends and family, who would suffer too, if something happened to the person. Actually this is one argument that is often used to justify hunting and killing animals, etc. It is because (at least this is what people in charge claim) if a chicken gets killed, there are no friends or family that suffer because of their loss. A further argument, also borrowed from animal ethics, is the aspect of self-awareness. A chicken does not know (again, this is the claim) that it *is*, neither does it know that it can die, and so forth. This might be true for certain animals or not, but for lifeless objects it certainly is. I am sure, there are many more reasons that can complete this list, but I think, the indicated aspects are sufficient for this paper's purpose.

The final question, therefore, should be answered by now: Human life is more valuable than artwork. In any case, the guard or even the thief should be saved (first). And here, recapitulated, is why: Since there is no such a thing as intrinsic value, artworks can be replicated. If there is no way to replicate them, such as a symphony or an entire novel, there is still the possibility to talk about it, to pass on the moral, the truth-value or what else it was that presented

11 In this context it does not matter if we are social beings by nature or if we are forced to be social (as Thomas Hobbes suggests it).

the value of the artwork. This, however, does not work with humans, they cannot be replicated. One reason for that is that they can change, they develop over time. Objects do not have this feature. It is still possible to talk about humans and why they were valuable to somebody or an entire community, but at the same time, the loss of a human life causes more pain to people than the loss of an object. One more aspect that is not to be underestimated is the fear of mortality. If the guard of the thief dies, people get reminded of their own mortality. This is why many people cannot stand to see a dead body, for example. Equally, or maybe even more important is the principle behind all this. If it was the right thing to do to save the painting instead of the guard or the thief, the logical consequence of this would be that if *I* am in the same situation, *I* would not get saved either. And this is what moral conventions are. Principles and thoughts like that govern our coexistence. It is in nobody's interest, that artworks have more value than human life.