

THE BEARING OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF ESTHETICS ON ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION The possibility of analyzing ethics in the context of the sociology of esthetics is not novel. In his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Marx demonstrates that a theory of social ethics is predicated on a system of esthetics. One of the least justifiable abuses of Marx has been to confuse self-directing activity (Selbsttaetigkeit) as used in early Marxist literature with labor (Arbeit), and both with factory work as we ordinarily think of it (Fromm 1961 24). The young Marx implies that by its nature, human-kind is less homo laborans than homo poeta. In Das Kapital, Marx explicitly says that by human labor he is referring to man's capacity consciously to produce history from his own imagination (1906 11 c). Unlike the animals, whose worlds are genetically fixed, humanity's worlds are its own projects. Humans collectively construct their realities according to their own imaginative designs and cultivated skills.

ART DEFINED Marx says that art is a dialectical process, a dialog between one's essence and one's objective existence. It begins with the experience of opposition between what-might-be and what-is-in-fact; in the contradiction between subjective consciousness of possibility and objective contingencies. In the creative act, the artist embodies his/her essence in existence, reconciling the in-here with the out-there. Art is the humanizing of nature; it is the remaking of nature after the human image. When, as artist, one appropriates the object world back to oneself, making it one's own, the artist experiences a sense of joy in the union of self and the object world. One finds and recognizes oneself in the concrete embodiment of one's ideas, designs, and oughts, and is symbolically increased. Momentarily, one transcends personal finitude by giving real substance to otherwise

ephemeral wishes.

. Like Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx, I do not limit the term art to what are considered fine arts like music, painting, sculpture, and dance. The whole of one's human existence, style of life, presentations of self, face, rituals, myths, loving, working, and playing can be construed as artistic symbolism woven into the world of things.

. I will not review the criteria used to distinguish between good and bad art, such as parsimony, stylistic accuracy, naturalness, and care. Even in ordinary discourse, some art forms, some life styles, some cultures are said to elevate man's sense of worth while others demean it. Some justify human existence while others suggest its futility. If it is true that good art is a necessary condition for human fulfillment, then collectively and individually we have an obligation to maximize the opportunities for such art. The good society promotes the possibilities of good art. This is not an absolute imperative without exceptions, but policies inconsistent with life-enhancing art require public justification.

. As an ethical problem the question of esthetics can be reduced to 3 elements corresponding to 3 analytically distinct moments of the creative act: 1) the images one wants to see embodied in the object world; 2) the capacities of the artist to implement this design in the world; and 3) the validation of the product by the audience. In accordance with Becker, I propose that as an artwork, a person's lifestyle be considered either impoverished or rich (Becker 1968 185): 1) One can have either a rich imagination and sense of possibilities for oneself and the world, and a belief in the credibility of one's own sensibilities, or be severely limited and lack trust in one's personal experience. 2) One can have faith in a variety of abilities to

handle oneself and others and the world, and the courage to carry through one's projects, or one may have no skills, nor belief in ability or strength to act on one's plans. 3) One may have the products of one's hands independently affirmed by the judging audience or see them ridiculed, ignored, or destroyed.

. These are ideal-typical traits, but they provide a basis for an ethical critique of society. Becker's work can be understood as such a critique. It demonstrates how contemporary society paralyzes the artistic impulse at each of these three moments, and how modern culture is later perverted and neurotic, self-righteous and cynical, escapist, fantasy-ridden, and unworthy of humanity.

. We must also credit Becker for this insight: that the most ethically relevant social psychologies are at root, all theories of esthetic criticism. This includes Freudianism, Marxism, and symbolic interactionism, as originated by William James and George Herbert Mead. As Figure 1 indicates, each paradigm roughly corresponds to one of the three moments of the artistic process.

FREUDIANISM: IMAGINATIVE MOMENT

. Freud holds the seminal act in crippling the imagination is the child's voluntary suppression of urges, thoughts, perceptions, hopes, and possibilities forbidden by the parents. Sociology would describe the process as the child's learning not to verbalize inappropriate feelings and ideas, so as to retain the parents' affection. Habitually unverbilized possibilities remain unconscious. The Oedipus complex is not a subterranean sexual constellation inherited from ancestral ages. It is rather the whole psychological burden the child imposes on its own imagination as a defense against the anxiety of parental rejection. The voluntary imposition of the parents' world by the child on itself is an attempt to maintain its self-esteem creatively, in the harshly defined bounds

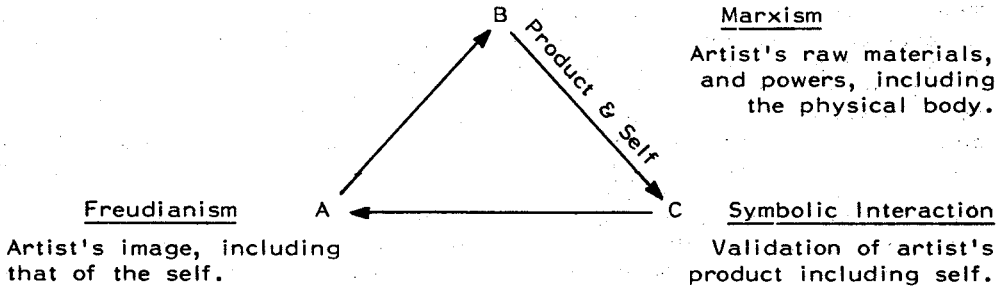
set by its parents. It is also the culmination of a successful, if perverse, artistic act by the parents. The parents seek to embody their own designs concretely, by filling the insides of a convenient and helpless other - their own child - and by so doing, to live symbolically in and through their child.

. Freud fails to ask why the parents oppress their child this way. Marxism suggests that it is a predictable outcome of a capitalist regime, where even the free professions of law, medicine, and teaching, are increasingly proletarianized. Alternative art forms are rarely possible except for a small elite. Psychic exploitation of a helpless victim is one of the few vehicles whereby an individual, powerless in other institutional realms, can express creative impulses.

MARXISM: PRODUCTIVE MOMENT

. Marxism is a critique of the manner in which capitalism systematically cripples a person's capacity to craft objects skillfully, according to his/her own desires, strength, and speed, and to experience directly the products of his/her own hands. This occurs in 3 ways which follow from the expropriation of the commonwealth by private entrepreneurs. 1) Private ownership of the object world, and raw materials on which the artist must work, limits the opportunities to be creative. 2) Monopoly ownership of raw materials and worker's tools permits the capitalist legally to seize the surplus produced by the worker-artist. Private expropriation destroys a sense of connection and responsibility for the product, and the quality diminishes. 3) Rationalizing production through machinery and power, division of labor, and automation augments profit. But it also estranges the worker from his/her own powers and skills, limiting the worker's ability to deal effectively with what s/he has created. These become a specter over which the worker has no control. The worker

FIGURE 1: ARTISTIC PROCESS, SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY & THE THREE MOMENTS
(Arrows show direction of action cycle.)



is alienated from the objects and means of production.

. For the alienated artist, the creative desire, the craving to overcome the separation between subject and object must be met in progressively narrower and more perverted ways—namely through commodity fetishism and fantasy. The first refers to compulsive purchases of more and more, and competing for esteem based on consumption. The purchases give the buyer the illusion of power.

. Because it confers direct purchasing power, money is the ultimate fetish, and the capitalist its most faithful venerator. The capitalist, a miser gone mad, buys compulsively, only to sell later at a profit. Profit margin is the most visible measure of self-worth.

. Where capitalism prevails, the metaphors of marketing and exchange penetrate every niche of social life and consciousness itself. All persons frantically calculate payoffs and risks, and attempt to adapt to market conditions. They try to package themselves as commodities high in demand and low in supply. One who has no market value and nothing to show for his/her investments and cannot capitalize on his/her person is haunted by the thought that s/he has no value as a human being.

SYMBOLIC INTERACTION VALIDATION

. No symbolic creation, whether a painting or an individual's carefully-wrought appearance is self-validating. The human is not a god, but requires an audience's

independent affirmation to have a sense of worth, and to experience the self as real. Anomie, the experience of possibilities of creative license without limit, is much more terrifying than alienation. Everyone requires the cognitive support of the other to sustain their visions. If they cannot find this in another human being, they will unconsciously manufacture an imaginary other to serve this purpose. Some are so burdened with the approval motive, so entrapped by their vulnerability to the other that their lives are a frantic litany of impression management and socially-induced dread. Other-directedness as a lifestyle becomes elevated to the status of universal law of social life (Goffman 1959).

. Symbolic interactionism tells us that inner-directedness, richness of imagination, and confidence in one's powers are largely functions of self-regard. If so, the larger ethical question of maximizing the possibilities of truly human art reduces to this: How can the individual learn to love him/herself? According to symbolic interactionism, the I can only come to know itself by contemplating its reflection in the face of the you. It is thus unlikely that one can come to love oneself unless first one is loved by another. This implies that imaginative and confident art is empirically impossible outside of an affirmative community. Humanity cannot be fully free in the sense of projecting new meanings into the world without community

support. Symbolic interactionism demonstrates why love, the saying "Yes, it is good that you exist!" to another is recognized by ethicists as the highest natural virtue (Peiper 1974). It shows why the precariousness of one's value and identity, being tied to a favorable response from a significant other, should be a convincing portrait of the tortures of Hell. As Sartre says, "Hell is the other!"

. Freud and Marx, speaking of facilitating self-regard, also posit the necessity of an affirmative other. Marx looks to the re-appropriation of man's powers and products back to himself, so that he might recognize in them his own strength, beauty, and wisdom. But revolutionary recollection is always a political act. No individual will risk it without the constant nurture and support of the Party, and more immediately, the Party cell. Freud maintains that only a cathartic reliving of the psychic wound engendered by the parent will liberate the adult from the raging child within. But this is possible only with a supportive therapist.

CONCLUSION There can be no creative me without a loving we. Conversely, comrades, therapists, parents, friends, teachers, and other helpers can love others no more than they fundamentally respect, honor and love themselves. Self-love is the basic form, measure and foundation of all other forms of love (Pieper 1974 80). If one cannot honestly say, "It is good that I exist," one cannot logically affirm the existence of another. If one does not deem oneself worthy of the joys of selfless giving to another, one has little motive to do so.

. Social critics identify self-love with selfishness and narcissism, and as infantile and communally destructive. But selfishness and self-love, far from being identical, are opposites (Fromm 1956 48). Ironically, it is lack of self-fondness, and a gnawing sense of personal worthlessness and failure that drives the

selfish person to snatch at satisfaction, to hoard material goods, and to drive him/herself to achieve public acclaim regardless of home, health, and survival.

. Our ethical obligation to maximize esthetic opportunities for others should be obvious. If we value our lives so little that we view the pursuit of our own happiness as self-indulgence, then the products of our pedagogy, therapy and political action will be crippled. As physicians to society how can we heal the wounds which we all bear in our heart? Can it be done through the strength of individual will, as Emerson suggests? Or will it demand renewed faith and surrender to unconditional love of the sacred Other? If this outline of the sociology of esthetics is correct, then the solutions to our most pressing ethical problems rest on the answers we can generate.

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