

An Analysis of the Relationship Between Moral, Educational and Symbolic Values and Their Validity for the Definition of Art

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Abstract: Defining art through artistic values remains a controversial issue in the field of art, with a myriad of artistic values such as aesthetic, historical and emotional values defining works of art. Likewise, it is a challenging task to clearly explain the relationship between these artistic values and to systematically sort out the logical relationships between them to assess their order more effectively. The main question of the research will be interconnected with the definitions of the various values provided in the article and identify some of the links between them. This paper analyzes the relationship between moral, educational and symbolic values and their validity for the definition of art. By analyzing a range of extreme and moderate examples presented by scholars, the study aims to distill the most balanced conclusions and compare them to popular theoretical perspectives. Ultimately, through logical reasoning, the study identifies moral value as a central factor influencing aesthetic value. This value not only plays a key role in the formation of aesthetic perceptions, but also exhibits a complex interrelationship with cognitive values.

Keywords: Art, Moral value, Educational value, Symbolic Value

1. Introduction

Recent researches often combine the discussion of multiple values when exploring the role of artistic value in defining artworks to support their viewpoints. However, many studies merely summarize these values or state that they influence one another, without clarifying the significant roles these values play when interacting with each other and how they affect the primary value in defining art. In terms of the field of artistic value, the sequence can be further arranged to identify the most fundamental or effective value factors. This practice is based on the recognition that aesthetics is one of the most significant factors influencing artistic value. Existing research suggests that aesthetic and emotional values are direct manifestations of artistic value [1, 2]. However, the factors that directly or indirectly affect these values appear vague, lacking further informative analysis to distinguish their respective roles. To address this gap, this study examines the relationships among moral, educational, cognitive and symbolic values, establishing a logical sequence to clarify their influence on artistic value. For example, if the connection between moral value and educational value is singled out, the task of distinguishing them would become straightforward. However, both are interwoven with the enhancement of cognitive value. Therefore, on this basis, their connectivity can be explained through Elvio Baccarini & Milica Czerny Urban's analysis in terms of the relations between moral value and

cognitive value (which is interconnected with educational value). However, such a conclusion was rejected by Cassirer based on his four perspectives (mentioned in Section 2.2) [3][4]. By introducing two main factors—Basicity (the extent to which one value is foundational to another) and Connectivity (the ability of a value to link with multiple other values)—the distinctions among these artistic values are likely to become clearer. Additionally, examples will be provided regarding artworks that involve more than one artistic value to further illustrate the connectivity.

2. Moral value

Radical autonomists argue that moral assessments of artworks are entirely inappropriate [5]. Conversely, moderate autonomists believe that while artworks can be morally assessed, this does not affect their artistic value [5]. Radical moralists assert that moral assessment is the sole determinant of artistic value [5]. In contrast, moderate moralists believe that the moral characteristics of artistic works are sometimes related to their artistic value, recognizing their importance while emphasizing that their influence is not always decisive [6]. Ethicists claim that moral defects or merits are necessarily aesthetic defects or merits, and immoralists suggest that immoral elements can positively contribute to an artwork's artistic value [5][6].

D. H. Lawrence or Spike Lee, often associated with moralist perspectives, argue that moral didacticism—while potentially simplifying the relationship between morality and artistic themes or imagery—has only an indirect effect on artistic value. This idea was introduced based on their proposal of moral didacticism, which emphasizes that artistic works are not only objects of aesthetic appreciation but can also influence the moral concepts and emotional responses of the audience through their content and form, conveying moral lessons. For instance, D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* presents human nature and morality, implying the author's moral concepts and in-depth thinking which suited the characteristics of moral didacticism [6].

From the ethicalist perspective, they claim that moral value have a direct relationship with artistic value, where the moral character of a work is relevant to its artistic value, wherever there is a moral flaw the work is of lesser value as art and wherever it is morally virtuous the work's value as art is enhanced [6]. However, Gaut's ethicalist viewpoint has been refuted by the two viewpoints mentioned by Kieran, pointing out that ethicalism cannot explain why moral flaws, in some cases, can instead enhance the value of an artistic work. For instance, in the movie "Man Bites Dog", the depiction of violent scenes, although it is morally controversial, it prompts the audience to have profound reflections on moral boundaries [6]. This cognitive value may have enhanced the artistic value of this work, such idea was also mentioned by Cao Yali, She believes that if an artist uses immoral elements as an expression method or material in the creation process, and the main idea and purpose are to express a deeper meaning and connotation, then the immoral factors in the work will not affect the artistic value of the art piece. Taking "The Story of the Stone " as an example, it is introduced that the author Cao Xueqin created it based on real life, which contains the author's compassion and reflection, as well as some thoughts that violated the mainstream values of society at that time. Therefore, Kieran leads to the next viewpoint of moderate moralism which he partly agree with, although with limitations involved. Overall, Kieran believes that there is a complex interactive connection between moral values and art, that is, the moral characteristics of a work sometimes affect its artistic value [6]. Morality is not a decisive factor because the viewpoint influenced by this position is conditional and not universally applicable to all situations.

2.1. Relations with cognitive value

In the debate surrounding Peter Lamarque, an institutionalist perspective was advocated, emphasizing that the existence of artworks depends on a set of conventions and norms regarding the

creation, appreciation, and evaluation of literary works [3]. These conventions and norms encompass the attitudes, expectations, and reactions of authors and readers. Under its institutional framework, the moral and cognitive dimensions of artworks are considered integral to their artistic value. Consequently, artworks should not only be evaluated at the aesthetic level but also take into account their roles in moral guidance and knowledge dissemination. From this perspective, cognitive and moral values are interrelated, without a hierarchical sequence. Hume's view, by contrast, aligns more closely with sentimentalism; that is, the natural ability of taste is the fundamental basis for human beings to make moral and aesthetic judgments. Both are guided by natural laws and can generate good or bad reactions through education. While both types of judgments evoke emotional responses—eliciting approval or opposition—only “mental” taste, which underlies moral and aesthetic discernment, can be cultivated through the “intervention of ideas” [7].

2.2. Relations with aesthetic value

This section centers on the discussion of Gault's viewpoint which was in support of ethicists. Gault mentioned three powerful arguments in support of the ethicists, though only the first two were elaborated in the article [1]. The first argument is the merited response, which asserts that artworks elicit responses from viewers based on their content, and their aesthetic success partly depends on these responses being “merited”. If a response is deemed unethical, it may be considered unmerited, thereby diminishing the aesthetic quality of the work. In this framework, a direct correlation exists between an artwork’s ability to evoke a merited response and its moral implications. The second argument is the moral beauty view, which posits that “moral virtues are beautiful, and moral vices are ugly” [1]. Therefore, a work with ethical goodness possesses a form of beauty, which is fundamentally an aesthetic value. Consequently, moral value enhances aesthetic value. The last argument which was not mentioned in the article is my speculation based on the first two viewpoints. Artworks can reveal moral truths or stimulate moral reflection through narration, metaphor, emotional resonance, (For example, “Hamlet” explores the complexity of human nature). Cognitive value is a component of aesthetic value. If the moral insights of a work deepen the audience's understanding of the world, this cognitive achievement itself enhances its aesthetic. Overall, moral value contributes to aesthetic value, reinforcing Gault’s broader argument on their interconnection [1].

3. Educational value, symbolic value and moral value

In discussing educational value, this analysis focuses on Cassirer's perspective. During the process, the direct connection between educational value and symbolic value is involved. Cassirer's conception of art as symbolic form in human culture consists of four principal claims that can function as ideals for a conception of human education in terms of art [8]. 1. Art is an act of human freedom; 2. art is separate from morality; 3. art is a counterpart to science; 4. art is myth remembered [4].

The first claim underscores the act of self-determination, wherein the human self is shaped through its ability to make its world [4]. Cassirer’s second idea claims that the purpose of art is not morality or inherently corruptive of moral sensibility. Art, for Cassirer, is a symbolic form rooted in common experience, not an elitist pursuit limited to artists and connoisseurs. Morality, on the other hand, distinguishes between good and evil, right and wrong [4]. The moral and aesthetic are connected with each other in the same trend as all the symbolic forms act. They are both opposed to each other and complementary at the same time (what he calls “harmony in contrariety”). The third idea, Cassirer links art with science, proving that science has a dialectical relationship in human culture. Science aims for universal, objective truths by removing subjectivity, while art expresses subjective consciousness through sensory perception, reflecting distinct cultural perspectives. The

last point of view distinguishes art from myth. Myth operates through immediacy, where a ritual dancer becomes the god, merging reality and symbol. In contrast, art requires conscious distance from objects, enabling subjective creativity and deliberate emotional shaping.

Cassirer used these 4 ideas to reinforce his perspective of educational value of Art. Notably, he denies that there is a relation between Moral value and educational value (as indicated in his second idea) and links educational value with cognitive value by presenting a complete phenomenology of knowledge (Erkenntnis) in The third volume of The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: expressive function" (Ausdrucksfunktion) (Darstellungsfunktion) (reine Bedeutungsfunktion) [4]. Overall, Cassirer believes that educational value is paralleled with symbolic value which is inseparable and such form of value is the determining factor in terms of artistic value.

When examining the relationship between moral and educational value, it is essential to distinguish between moral value and moral education, as these concepts differ in their modes of manifestation. Margherita Mauri, for instance, explores the interaction between painters, paintings, reality, and observers, concluding that viewers can acquire moral knowledge through engagement with artworks (Moral Upbringing through the Arts and Literature) [9]. This suggests that art and literature function as conduits for integrating moral values into education, thereby fostering holistic development. This interpretation, however, stands in direct opposition to Cassirer's theory, as it complicates the attempt to maintain a strict conceptual separation between morality and education. While Cassirer maintains that art and morality are distinct—arguing that art serves as an intellectual expression of the perceived world, whereas morality is grounded in ethical binaries—he does acknowledge that art can raise moral questions. However, he attributes this not to art's intrinsic nature but to the broader cultural context in which both aesthetic and moral considerations coexist [4].

However, this view was refuted by Cao Yali, who claimed that morality, as a universal behavioral measure, runs through all aspects of people's daily lives [10]. Art and morality, beauty and goodness are fundamentally integrated. Morality and art influence each other. There is no art that is completely divorced from morality, and art also imperceptibly promotes the progress and development of morality. There are fundamental differences between Cao Yali and Cassirer. While one agrees that Art is a form of expression of emotions by human (naturally express the author's moral consciousness), the other advocates that art is expression formed as a knowledge of the world as sense [6, 11]. Nonetheless, there are significant limitations to Cao's argument. Her analysis predominantly focuses on the social dimension of artistic value—for example, interpreting The Story of the Stone as a critique of feudal society—without sufficiently substantiating the intrinsic relationship between moral and artistic value. Furthermore, her perspective does not account for the existence of artworks that resist moral categorization, such as abstract and conceptual art, which do not readily lend themselves to ethical judgment [1].

The connection among symbolic value, cognitive value and educational value is also reflected in Yu Tai's "Research on the Value of Modern Commercial Photography Art Based on Symbolic Semantics". Saussure believed that people's social activities and language activities can be expressed through symbolization. The human consciousness process itself is a process of symbolization, combining and regenerating the cognition in thinking in the form of symbols to better understand human consciousness. Saussure regarded the symbol as a carrier of information and summarized the symbol, believing that the symbol has the following characteristics: The symbol itself is material. Secondly, when transmitting the symbol, it should be a kind of information different from the carrier itself and can represent other things. Finally, the symbol must be able to convey a social message, that is, the information agreed upon by society and reached a consensus by everyone, rather than defined by individuals. (This way of defining organically unifies

the materiality and ideology of the symbol and is a relatively objective conclusion, which has been recognized by many scholars).

Yu Tai defined symbols through the "Xinhua Dictionary", believing that they are marks used to distinguish certain characteristics. Symbols are the same markers used by people to represent the same object, and they can represent all the external characteristics, internal thoughts or concepts of the object in any form through perception. Therefore, symbols are the medium of communication between people. This view, to some extent, while recognizing Cassirer's definition of symbolic value, takes a relatively mild position. Yu Tai only emphasizes the symbolic symbol as a form of expression, presenting it as an extension of cognitive value and recognizing its educational significance within artistic value. He proposed a more comprehensive solution in Cassirer's rather extreme view (that the connection between educational value and symbolic value is actually the only factor of artistic value), that is, symbolic value encompasses cognitive value, and educational value serves as an indirect influencing factor accompanying it.

4. The relationships

The relationships among these values are complex and highly debated, with no definitive conclusion due to the presence of strong counterarguments. Given these ongoing controversies, it is essential to evaluate the "hierarchy of values" to distinguish between Basicity (the fundamental influence of one value over another) and Connectivity (the extent to which values interrelate and interact).

4.1. The connection as a whole

The relations between moral value and artistic value influence each other (1.), an idea partly supported by Cao Yali [10]. However, directly connecting moral value to artistic value lacks sufficient backing; artistic value is a macroscopic term that encompasses various values. Such arguments can be easily refuted by citing conceptual works like Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" and ordinary unaltered objects like snow-shovels (In Advance of the Broken Arm) and John Cage's 4'33", leading many to refuse to agree with such conclusions (Cassirer, Gaut) [12]. Regarding educational value, Cassirer refused to recognize any connections with moral value (from Cassirer's four perspectives), and set symbolic value directly as one aspect of educational value. Conversely, Peter Lamarque claimed that both values are interrelated within his institutional framework. Additionally, cognitive value is particularly difficult to analyze in isolation, as it plays a role in both education and moral understanding, making its definition complex and ambiguous. The claims Gibson put forward for cognitivists are highly informative, supporting their viewpoints through three types of knowledge: propositional knowledge, experiential knowledge, and clarity [1]. For the purposes of this discussion, cognitive value is currently considered a subset of moral value. Similarly, aesthetic value also maintains a connection with moral value, which will be further explored in section 3.2.

4.2. The internal connection

In this section, the sequential logic between values plays a major role as it can be seen as a possible mean to achieve of goal. This study partly takes Gaut's view point into account (1.2), which believes moral value promotes cognitive value (1.1) and influences aesthetic value. Aesthetic value appears to be the only value on which there is universal consensus regarding its status as an artistic value [1]. Compared with Cao Yali's direct connection of moral value, this sequential structure is more persuasive. As for educational value and symbolic value, although Cassirer bound these two kinds of values, only a few points are recognised in this article [4]. Cassirer's logical form can be roughly divided into: art is rooted in common experience, awakens emotions, and makes our perception ordered. However, morality also orders us (good and evil, justice and injustice). To some extent, the

common experience mentioned by Cassirer is equivalent to the experience of artists, and artists will be influenced by morality and then create works. In this study, only one of Cao Yali's viewpoints is be recognised, which considers art as one of the expressions of human emotions and something that naturally expresses the author's moral consciousness (8). Cassirer's "harmony in contrariety" relationship between moral and aesthetic values fundamentally denies their contribution to artistic value in logic and classifies both within culture. He also proposed that a literary work is the product of the artist's subjectivity and an act of self-awareness. Therefore, the main dissemination channel of educational value stems from symbolic value (Yu Tai, Cassirer), and cognitive value, as a bridge and link between symbolic value and moral value, is disseminated. However, symbolic value is only a type of branch of the dissemination channel of cognitive value and is not directly linked to the moral value with the most influential aesthetic value.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the fundamental relationships among these values in the context of aesthetic value have been clarified. Moral value emerges as the most significant determinant of aesthetic value, exerting a greater influence than other value factors. Cognitive value, as an indispensable component, shapes aesthetic value through its interaction with moral value. Meanwhile, symbolic value plays a crucial role in influencing educational value and serves as a conduit for disseminating cognitive value, although its overall impact remains secondary to that of moral value. Given the complexity of these interconnections, the scope of this study is insufficient to establish a fully developed logical framework. A more comprehensive analysis, incorporating detailed and direct evidence, is necessary to substantiate these relationships. Future research should focus on refining the logical structure of these value connections and systematically compiling artistic values that have been widely recognized by scholars in the field.

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