Research

Artmaking as Bravery: A Virtue-Based Perspective

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Abstract:
In this article we will reflect on the relation of art to ethics. The matter has been investigated by numerous thinkers since Plato, and a few distinct philosophical positions have been codified, ranging, as is known, from the refusal of any moral evaluation of art (autonomism) to the position that moral considerations are in fact part and parcel of any aesthetic evaluation of art (moralism). We will, however, focus on some ethical aspects of artmaking itself, not on the moral assessment of artworks and of their impact. Our considerations will be informed by the approach to ethics known as virtue ethics, which means avoiding a narrow conception of ethics, especially a legalistic one that interprets morality as compliance with rules or commandments, and returning to an Aristotelian conception of the virtues as excellent character traits expressed in action. Furthermore, we will incorporate some contributions from the emergent field of virtue aesthetics. We will discuss the role of the virtue of courage in artmaking and conclude that virtue ethics and virtue aesthetics offer a promising new perspective on art and ethics.

Keywords: Virtue ethics; Virtue aesthetics; Artmaking; Aristotle; Moral evaluation of art; Art and fear

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1. Introduction

1.1. Art and morality

The question of the relation of art to morality has been debated for a very long time, at least since Plato's famous stern judgment over the arts in the Republic. Two opposite "strong" positions can be identified in this regard: moralism, that is the view that moral evaluations prevail over or subsume aesthetic considerations; and autonomism, which rejects any evaluation of art that is not purely aesthetic. In recent times, however, the main question seems to be not whether moral evaluations of art are appropriate, but whether they contribute to the assessment of the aesthetic value of the artwork (Peek, 2025).

1.2. Radical moralism vs. radical autonomism

Pure or radical moralism will reduce the aesthetic assessment of art to its moral assessment; it will exclusively concern itself with an artwork's moral quality and may therefore become unable to distinguish art from other cultural products (Peek, 2025). Radical autonomism (aestheticism) claims that art may be assessed only on the basis of merely aesthetic and formal standards; but to defend this approach, to defend the view that aesthetic assessment is superior to any other kind of assessment, and indeed self-sufficient, the proponents of autonomism will need to resort to moral arguments; they will, for example, exalt tolerance, curiosity, openness, individualism; eventually, Ella Peek notes: "Aestheticism, in its most extreme form, could almost be seen as a version of radical moralism"! (Peek, 2025).

1.3. Moderate positions

A few "weak" positions have then emerged, like moderate autonomism, moderate moralism, and others, which seem in practice more helpful than the intransigent "strong" positions. Moderate autonomism and moderate moralism move away from the assumption that, in the evaluation of artworks, ethical and aesthetic judgments may never be completely disentangled; only, the interpreter will tend to privilege, respectively, aesthetic or moral considerations. Moderate positions may be preferable to the radical or "strong" positions; still, they are concerned with the evaluation of artworks and of their likely moral influence on the viewer or on the society; they have little to say about the production of artworks. Furthermore, the moral considerations that we may make about art in a similar perspective are not different in nature from the moral considerations that we may make about any other cultural product that carries a morally relevant message, but is not art. We might benefit from a different approach to the ethical evaluation of art that recognizes the specific character of art as opposed to other vehicles of morally relevant messages, and that escapes a stern, fault-finding approach to art.

2. Virtue ethics

2.1. What is virtue ethics?

Virtue ethics is an approach to moral philosophy that emerged in the second half of the 20th century out of dissatisfaction with the then dominant approaches of deontology and consequentialism. The seminal text is generally considered to be the Oxford philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe's paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" (Anscombe, 1958). Anscombe's main reason for discontent with the prevalent schools of thought was their legalistic character, their emphasis on laws, rules, and obligations, which not only determined a rigid, stifling approach to morality, but was also unsuitable to a secularized society that had lost sight of a supreme legislator. Among other key philosophers in the development of the new approach to ethics are Bernard Williams (Williams, 1985) and Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre, 1985). Interestingly, Bernard Williams differentiated between morality and ethics in the sense that morality is represented by Kant's duty- and obligation-based approach to moral philosophy, while ethics is a broader concern akin to the Ancient Greeks' quest for the good life (Williams, 1985). It is in a similar, broader understanding of "ethics" that I submit my reflections (about virtue ethics see Slote, 2013; Russell, 2013).

2.2. *Virtue*

What does "virtue" mean, in this context? For Aristotle, virtues are desirable character traits that move a person closer to their ultimate purpose, their *telos*. Virtues are excellent character traits, which manifest themselves in admirable behavior, whereby a person demonstrates control over a particular emotion in a way that is appropriate to the concrete circumstances and is therefore able to act in accordance with reason. Virtues, for Aristotle are situated in a middle area between two corresponding excesses; for example, in relation to the emotion of fear, the virtue of courage stands somewhere between an excess of fear (the vice of cowardice) and an excess of confidence (rashness or temerity). Virtue can also be the appropriate behavior in relation to situations, for example, in relation to giving money, the virtue of generosity is somewhere in the middle between deficiency (stinginess) and excess (profligacy). It should be noted that Aristotle's view that virtues are found somewhere in the middle between two excesses must not be interpreted as an encouragement to mediocrity, because in different circumstances, very variable levels of effort might be required to raise to the virtuous Golden Mean (about Aristotle's ethics see Gottlieb, 2013).

2.3. *From virtue ethics to virtue aesthetics*

So, does a virtue-based approach have anything to say about art? Judging by the literature on Aristotle, virtue ethics and virtue aesthetics, yes. In a seminal paper, David Woodruff proposed to add to the catalog of traditional moral and intellectual virtues a set of properly aesthetic virtues (Woodruff, 2001). Aesthetic virtues enable both the making of art and its appreciation. The most important of such virtues are insight, sensitivity, vision, creativity, persistence, and courage (Woodruff, 2001). What makes such virtues "aesthetic" is their motivation and their orientation to the objective of creating something for aesthetic appreciation. Analogous virtues, indeed, may be involved in activities, which are not meant to create something for aesthetic appreciation; but in that case they are moral or intellectual virtues, not aesthetic.

2.4 *Peter Goldie's contribution*

An important contribution to the virtue-based study of art was made by Peter Goldie (Goldie, 2007). According to Goldie, "artistic activity, as expression of the virtues of artmaking and art appreciation, will, along with ethical activity and what Aristotle called contemplative activity, be a constituent part of what goes to make up human well-being […] art, like ethics, is not a luxury good: without art, as without ethics, one cannot do well: one's life would be profoundly impoverished" (Goldie, 2007). Goldie saw in virtue ethics an opportunity to reconnect artmaking to an understanding of ethics "as concerned with the deeper question of what makes a good life, and not with some parochial, more superficial, notion of morals or morality" (Goldie, 2007). He, however, drew an analogy between art and such a conception of ethics, whereas it is unclear whether it is necessary to speak of a mere analogy. Artmaking is, indeed, a way to pursue a good life (as Goldie himself argues); it is a way to pursue the humans' *telos*; it *is*, in sum, ethical action. We appreciate, however, Peter Goldie's choice to focus on the making of art and not on the work of art: "we need to work with a notion that will help us to see why art, like ethics, matters to us as human beings, and, for this purpose, to give definitional priority to the concept of artwork, however broadly conceived, runs the risk of our being concerned only incidentally and instrumentally with the various activities, intentions, dispositions, feelings, and so on, that are involved in the whole practice of the production and appreciation (including valuing) of artworks" (Goldie, 2007). According to Peter Goldie, then, the making of art and the appreciation of art are necessary to a good life for each human being, on variable levels and for different specific art forms (Goldie, 2007). But why is it so? What makes art beneficial and indeed necessary? The answer is probably that "art, when successful, can bind

us together as fellow humans—can appeal to, and reveal, our shared experiences and our shared emotional responses to those experiences" (Goldie, 2007). I share this understanding and appreciation of art, but it should also be noted that it was not expressed by Aristotle himself.

3. Art and courage

3.1 Fear

Of all the virtues that may be relevant or necessary to artmaking, I would like to reflect in particular on the virtue of courage. It has often been observed that making art requires courage, in many ways. First, art is often self-expression, which exposes the artist's vulnerability. The artist must overcome the fear of criticism (even internalized criticism) and the fear of failure. They must face their own technical and aesthetic limitations and overcome self-doubt. The unbridgeable chasm between ideal and execution will always trouble the artist. There is no shortage of testimonies about fear in artmaking. In their book "Art & Fear", David Bayles and Ted Orland put it clearly: "Making art can feel dangerous and revealing. Making art is dangerous and revealing. Making art precipitates self-doubt, stirring deep waters that lay between what you know you should be, and what you fear you might be" (Bayles and Orland, 2023).

3.2 Risk

Furthermore, artmaking always involves risk. The risk may be a creative risk, when undertaking a creative activity, the outcome of which is by definition uncertain; when experimenting with a new medium or new techniques. The risk may be also a personal risk of stigma or dereliction, when the artist challenges artistic conventions, social norms, or even entire political regimes. The risk may be symbolic, psychological, or social; may be also a concrete risk of persecution. Many artists struggle also to support themselves and their families economically. David Bayles and Ted Orland identified the source of the modern artist's uncertainty and anxiety in their isolation, their lack of a social and cultural anchoring point, in contrast to the experience of artists in past ages: "Other people, in other times and places, had some robust institutions to shore them up: witness the Church, the clan, ritual, tradition. It's easy to imagine that artists doubted their calling less when working in the service of God than when working in the service of self. Not so today. Today almost no one feels shored up. Today artwork does not emerge from a secure common ground [...]. Making art now means working in the face of uncertainty; it means living with doubt and contradiction, doing something no one much cares whether you do, and for which there may be neither audience nor reward. [...] This is not the Age of Faith, Truth and Certainty" (Bayles and Orland, 2023).

3.3 Anxiety

Even in optimal circumstances, the artist often must confront the fear of rejection of one's work. Often the artist must face the fear of one's own emotions and sometimes even trauma; in other words, face one's demons. The artist may have to face troubling existential questions, like human suffering or the problem of evil; may have to face difficult philosophical or religious problems. That, too, requires courage. Furthermore, feverish competition is often present in artmaking, possibly with the attending fear. Also, as famously argued by Harold Bloom, the artist (the poet) must overcome the fear of never expressing one's originality and remaining forever captive to an earlier, more influential artist's influence, which entails a kind of symbolic death (Bloom, 1973). For an artist, a period of inactivity or of creative silence might represent a sort of symbolic annihilation; the fear of such experience is often the relentless spurn behind an artist's extreme productivity (Bayles and Orland, 2023). Finally, the artist's fear of one's own irrelevance or futility is compounded by the ultimate fear of the possible futility of art itself, or of its definitive sunset. So, in

many ways making art involves fear and overcoming fear; in other words, it requires courage. Aristotle made interesting observations about courage, and although he did not discuss courage in relation to artmaking, we think it would be worthwhile now turning to the Aristotelian account of courage.

4. Aristotle

4.1 Courage in the Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle discusses courage in the Nicomachean Ethics, in the context of war (Nicomachean Ethics, Book II). In accordance with his famous theory of the mean, Aristotle describes courage as being equally distant from fear (cowardice) and from excessive confidence (rashness, temerity). Although Aristotle discusses courage on the battlefield, his notion of courage applies also to other contexts (Vigani, 2017). According to Aristotle, however, courage is invoked not in all fear-inducing circumstances, but only in relation to risks that are voluntarily chosen; courage is not relevant to fear-inducing situations that one has not caused and that one can only passively endure, like illness or poverty, or a storm at sea. Furthermore, those who are not afraid because they are unaware of the risks facing them are not courageous either. In his Ethics, again taking examples from war and military operations, Aristotle differentiates between the courage of those who are not aware of the actual dangers before them and therefore look brave but fly as soon as reality appears, and the courage of those who are fully aware of the dangers before them (Nicomachean Ethics, Book III, Chapter XI).

4.2 Courage in artmaking

We believe this description of courage may apply to the artist, in the sense that the knowledge of the risks involved in artmaking often increases with experience and with artistic maturity; and therefore, artmaking becomes an ever more fearful enterprise, requiring more courage and resilience to the experienced artist than to the beginner. We think that not only Aristotle's account of courage is relevant to artmaking, but that his famous theory of the Golden Mean is relevant, too. An excess of fear would prevent the artist from sharing or even creating any artwork; rashness, or an excess of confidence, might induce the artist to technical mistakes or to an excess of originality or of radicalism that would make the artwork unintelligible or aesthetically unacceptable. There are sure many other ways in which the making of good art depends on avoiding excesses and getting something "just right".

4.3 Artmaking as an ethical activity

There is another aspect of Aristotle's account of courage that is relevant to artmaking. According to Aristotle, courage enables us to perform noble actions, and is therefore necessary for human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*. Courage is essential also because it is a prerequisite or a point of anchorage for the manifestation of other virtues of artistic creation like authenticity, integrity, and truthfulness (Wilson, 2020). We propose, that artmaking, besides of course expressing aesthetic values, is essentially a manifestation of (moral) courage and of other virtues enabled by courage and should therefore be considered as an ethical activity. Artmaking is not only a constitutive element of a good life and is not merely analogous to ethical action (as claimed by Peter Goldie (Goldie, 2007)); instead, we suggest that artmaking is itself a virtuous activity.

4.4 Courage in the appreciation of art

Is courage (moral, aesthetic) necessary for the appreciation of art, too? Definitively yes. In his seminal article on virtue ethics, David Woodruff briefly explains why it is so: "Aesthetic courage, like creativity, is not merely involved in the production of works, though is most evident there. One must also have aesthetic courage to evaluate works and look for new

insights in works that have been previously considered. One feature common to many great works is that they tell us about ourselves and about reality. Courage is needed to face what the work is saying. This overlaps with moral courage, but it is an aesthetic virtue when motivation is to face what the work tells us about ourselves in order to appreciate the work. Aesthetic courage fits between the vices of timorousness and recklessness" (Woodruff, 2001).

5. Conclusions

Both aesthetic courage and moral courage are necessary to make art (and to appreciate it). Therefore we argue that art should be regarded not only as an aesthetic activity, where the artist exercises aesthetic virtues; but also as an ethical activity because of the inevitable need to exercise moral virtues, too (like courage). Art is an activity that moves us closer to our *telos*.

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