

A Hermeneutic Justification for the Arts: Is the Aesthetic Logically Prior to Art?

Lorraine Kasprisin
Western Washington University

In "Aesthetic Experience, Hermeneutics, and Curriculum," Donald Blumenfeld-Jones provides a justification for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum by arguing for their intrinsic value. As such, it is meant to counter those arguments, like the epistemological arguments of Sheryle Bergmann-Drewe, that try to justify the arts as instrumental in achieving another good, namely, knowledge, or more specifically, "a rich understanding of the human experience."¹ Essentially, his argument for the intrinsic value of the arts takes the following form:

1. "Enhancement of all we do" is a fundamental educational good.
2. A particular way of being in the world which brings enhancement to all we do is the aesthetic experience.
3. The intrinsic value of the arts lies in the unique contribution they can make to the aesthetic experience.
4. The arts through their contribution to aesthetic experience are necessary in enhancing all we do.
5. The arts have intrinsic value, therefore, as a fundamental educational good.

Central to Blumenfeld-Jones argument is a particular understanding of the aesthetic experience. Blumenfeld-Jones places the aesthetic experience within the hermeneutic tradition (especially, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer), and argues for both an epistemological and an ontological meaning. Rejecting a foundationalist epistemology that creates a subject/object dualism, with its notions of control, method, and objectivity, hermeneutic understanding insists on a dialectical process. Here experience functions to expand the horizons of self-understanding by resisting or contradicting — transcending and negating — the presuppositions we bring to our understanding of the world, the so-called moment of negativity. In effect, true understanding requires a stance of dialectical openness to experience where we reconstruct questions from our vantage point in time and space while, at the same time, we allow the event or object to call into question our own horizon of meanings and assumptions. The understanding that is called into play is the understanding of the structure of our way of being in the world.

The aesthetic experience is located then within this hermeneutical context of being and understanding. It is characterized as an experience that has a quality of wholeness where the individual comes to understand (epistemological) through the act of doing (ontological), or "actively participating in the world through one's senses." It is in the act of making art that Blumenfeld-Jones locates the unique contribution that art can make to the aesthetic experience. For in the activity of making art, one not only comes to understand the self, but also comes to live in a particular way.

By arguing for art on the basis of the aesthetic, and then arguing for the aesthetic on the basis of a “life value,” Blumenfeld-Jones believes that he can offer a self-justifying argument for the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum. Although I share Blumenfeld-Jones concerns about the need for such justification, I think justifying art on the basis of the aesthetic may itself present some problems. To begin, it assumes that describing something as an aesthetic object and something as an art work are of the same order, that is, that predicates applicable to one are also applicable to the other. I will try to show instances where this is not always the case. Indeed, sometimes our knowledge that it is an art work that we are experiencing or creating is enough to determine our particular response.

For Blumenfeld-Jones, the aesthetic experience, as a particular way of being in the world, can be experienced not only in art-making, but in other forms of social life — play, meaningful action, even spirituality. Apparently, all have in common a sensory engagement with the world, which joins intellect and body in an experience of wholeness, in activities which are pursued for the sake of engaging in them. As Blumenfeld-Jones writes: “In attending in an embodied way to the fusion of the personal and the social through the ongoing circularity of knowing and doing which is experienced during play, meaningful action, and art-making we may be said to be experiencing aesthetically.”

In a sense, anything can become an object of aesthetic experience if only the proper attitude is assumed toward it. Art is simply viewed as offering a more heightened source of such experience. But making a concept of the aesthetic logically prior to the concept of art obscures the logical space that our concept of art occupies in our conceptual scheme.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Pretend I were walking by a room in which my friend was busy hammering away at an orange crate. The structure that was emerging appeared to be a bookcase and I stood for a while admiring the aesthetic qualities before I asked my friend, “Are you making a bookcase?” To which, my friend might reply, “No, I am creating an artwork.” Knowing that this is meant to be an artwork and not another kind of object will condition the kind of response I am most likely to take to it. Subsuming this ordinary orange crate under the category of art will set up certain expectations as well as provide a framework for my responses and assessments. As Arthur Danto has pointed out, art works would be the sort of thing “it makes sense, as it does not with mere objects, to ask what they are *of* or are *about*, what is their content or meaning.”² In effect, the orange crate as an aesthetic object and the orange crate as an artwork would have very different properties.

Let me give one more example. At one point in the paper, Blumenfeld-Jones describes an aesthetic experience he had out in the wilderness as “spiritual.” How do these two experiences differ? Again, Danto brings up an analogous situation. In considering Nietzsche’s account of the emergence of Western tragedy from early Greek Dionysiac rites, he remarks that there was a moment in Western consciousness when the concept of tragedy became separated from religious ritual from which it had evolved. The “birth of tragedy” is accompanied, for Danto, by the concept of representation and the idea that the god does not re-present itself but that the actor

represents the god. In effect, art comes to stand at a distance from the reality it is representing and takes its place as part of our semantical vocabulary — it becomes a vehicle for meaning. It becomes a statement about the world rather than being of the world.³

In the end, I do agree with Blumenfeld-Jones on his main concern. In today's climate of narrow, utilitarian curriculum thinking where students are more and more conceptualized as merely human capital in some economic competition for global markets, justifying the inclusion of the arts in the curriculum is crucial whether one proceeds to justify the aesthetic in existential terms or art in social-institutional terms.

1. Sheryle Bergmann Drewe, "A Justification for the Inclusion of the Arts in the Educational Curriculum," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 174-81.

2. Arthur Danto, "The Transformation of the Commonplace," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (Winter 1974):142.

3. *Ibid.*, 139-48.