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Morality and Art

A Little History

“Nowadays, there are large states attacking small states. There are large families striking at small families. The strong plunder the weak. The many tyrannise the few. The cunning deceive the foolish. The noble are arrogant towards the lowly. And robbery, disorder, theft and plunder all arise and cannot be stopped. If this is so, then suppose we strike the great bells, beat the sounding drums, strum lutes, blow pipes, and brandish shields and battle-axes. Will this enable good order to be imposed on the disorder of the world? I certainly don’t think so.” This is why Master Mo Zi said: “As before, imposing heavy taxes on the ten thousand people in order to make the sounds of the great bell, the sounding drum, lutes and pipes won’t help in seeking to promote the world’s benefits and eliminate the world’s harms.” This is why Master Mo Zi said: “Making music is to be condemned.”

—Mozi, fifth to fourth century BCE¹

In that case, Glaucon, when you meet admirers of Homer—who tell us that this is the poet who educated Greece and that for the management of human affairs and education in them, one should take up his works and learn them and live guided by this poet in the arrangement of one’s whole life—you should befriend and welcome them, since they are the best they are capable of being. And you should agree that Homer is the most poetic of the tragedians and the first among them. Nonetheless, be aware that hymns to the gods and eulogies of good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. For if you admit the honeyed Muse, whether in lyric

¹ Ian Johnston, *The Mozi: A Complete Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), §32.4.

or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law and the thing that has always been generally believed to be best—reason.

—Plato, fifth to fourth century BCE²

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.

—Du Bois, 1926³

When we ask about whether a work of art is moral or immoral, there are a number of things we might mean. A productive way to begin to unpack the question is to look at a few different debates about morality and art from different times and places in a bit of detail. By doing this, we can see more clearly what issues are at stake when we argue about art and ethics.

Here I take up three very famous such arguments about morality and art from different periods of history: the dispute between Mozi and Xunzi about the value of music in classical China; the contrast between Plato's and Aristotle's views about poetry in ancient Greece; and the debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke about the moral responsibilities of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance. Each of these arguments highlights somewhat different, but overlapping, issues. For Mozi and Xunzi, the crux of the matter is how we weigh the material and human costs of making music against its character and community-building effects. For Plato and Aristotle, the critical matter is poetry's relationship to reason: whether poetry infects us so as to undermine the use of our reason, or whether poetry offers cognitive insights as well as emotional benefits. Du Bois and Locke turn their attention to the role of the artist, and whether artists have a moral obligation to uplift their intended audience.

The goal of this discussion is to set out some of the major questions and problems to be taken up in the rest of the book: in other words, to give an overview of the philosophical landscape.

² Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 607a.

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (1926): 290–297, at §26.

1.1. Music in Classical China

In the fifth century BCE, the philosopher Mozi condemned music in the harshest terms.⁴ Mozi lived during the Warring States Period, during which the reigning Zhou dynasty crumbled and China was effectively divided into numerous small states, which were more or less constantly at war with one another. Mozi was a social reformer and philosopher who called for radical changes to the society of his day: an end to war and moral equality for all (commoner and nobility alike). In particular, Mozi and his followers opposed the elaborate musical and cultural productions that local rulers would stage. He argued that these musical performances, like elaborate funerals, represented a terrible waste of limited resources: “These days, when kings, dukes, and great men put on musical performances, they divert such vast resources that could be used to produce food and clothing for the people.”⁵ While the Confucian thinkers of that era celebrated the value of ritual practices, music, and poetry, the Mohists condemned wastefulness and excess.

Mozi’s reasoning was consequentialist; some regard Mozi as the first consequentialist philosopher. Mozi argued that musical performances were wrong because they harmed the people rather than helping them. Mohist consequentialism makes use of two key ideas: *li* and *jian’ai*. *Li* is often translated as “profit” or “benefit,” and it refers to the material costs and benefits of an action: in Mozi’s case, especially basic needs, such as rest, food, shelter, relief from suffering, and so on. *Jian’ai* is normally translated as “universal love” or “impartial caring”—it emphasizes the importance of seeking benefits not just for oneself or one’s family, but for all people impartially. For Mohists, the tests of any proposed policy are (1) does it produce more net benefits than the alternatives? and (2) are those benefits applied to everyone impartially? We are to act in ways that benefit all humanity, without preference to any person or group of persons.

⁴ See Mozi, “A Condemnation of Musical Performances,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 105–110, and also Johnston, *The Mozi*. I have given a more detailed account of Mozi’s arguments with the Confucians in my “On the Ancient Idea That Music Shapes Character,” *Dao* 15, no. 3 (2016): 341–354. See also Eric Hutton and James Harold, “Music,” in *The Dao Companion to Xunzi*, ed. Eric Hutton (New York: Springer, 2016), 269–289.

⁵ Mozi, “Condemnation of Musical Performances,” 107. It is striking how closely Leo Tolstoy echoes these criticisms, thousands of years later, in the opening paragraphs of his *What Is Art?*, trans. Almeyda Maude (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 9–16ff.)

According to Mozi, courtly musical performances fail both of these tests. Such performances were a regular part of courtly life during that era. These performances could be very large, with many performers playing a variety of instruments that were sometimes made of valuable materials, such as large bronze bells and drums of various sizes. Not only did such performances cost a great deal of material resources (the enormous traditional bells were very expensive to build), but they also cost precious time and labor. Ordinary people (not part of the nobility) were recruited to attend these performances, and this cost them time. “If women delight in musical performances and spend their time listening to them, they will not be able to rise at dawn and retire in the evening, spinning and weaving to produce hemp, silk, linen, and other types of cloth.”⁶ The rich and powerful do get to enjoy a pleasant pastime without exerting any effort, but the people as a whole are harmed because they will not be able to finish the necessary household tasks. While listening to music is undeniably pleasant, the temporary pleasures of listening to music cannot compensate for the substantial physical toll involved in producing it. In other words, for Mozi, the question of music’s value came down to its costs and its benefits—the latter were meager and the former considerable.

Mozi’s arguments did not go unanswered by the Confucians, who positioned themselves as the defenders of traditional rituals and cultural practices. In responding to Mozi’s arguments, Confucians did not dispute the particular claims he made about the costs of elaborate musical performances. Confucians, including Mengzi and Xunzi, argued these performances were justified by their role in shaping moral character and promoting social cohesion. These qualities, which Mozi did not discuss, were the most important. According to the Confucians, one cannot capture the value of public musical performances merely by counting up the material benefits (*li*) that music might bring. Moral character and social cohesion are qualities that they believed could not be captured in Mohist terms.

In the fourth century BCE, the Confucian philosopher Xunzi wrote an essay entitled “Discourse on Music,” which was specifically intended to rebut Mozi’s arguments. In this essay, Xunzi wished to show the critical importance of music as a social and moral good. He emphasized the connections between music and virtue, and he claimed that the joy that music inspires

⁶ Mozi, “Condemnation of Musical Performances,” 109.

in people is a sign of this (in Chinese, “joy” and “music” are homographs).⁷ Xunzi argued that music both models and develops character traits in listeners: corrupt music makes us “dissolute, arrogant, vulgar, and base,”⁸ while proper music makes us “harmonious and not dissolute.”⁹ The idea that good music develops good character is also present in earlier Confucian thought. A number of relevant remarks attributed to Kongzi (Confucius) in the *Analects* illustrate this: for example, see §§3.23, 3.25, 7.14, 8.8, 8.15, and 15.11. So music can affect the moral character of individual people, for good or ill.

But Confucians also believed that music was important because of its social role. Good music is good for society as a whole. Good music unites people with one another: through music, people come to “share the same delights.”¹⁰ It helps people to think of themselves as part of a larger whole, and to protect and aid one another. Corrupt music, by contrast, divides people against one another and undermines the stability of society.

Xunzi therefore uses moral criteria to critique certain songs and praise others: “Dissolute customs and the tunes of Zheng and Wei make people’s hearts licentious. Putting on the ritual belt, robes, and cap, and dancing the *Shao* and singing the *Wu* make people’s hearts invigorated.”¹¹ Good music is that which brings about positive change in character; bad music is that which does the opposite. Xunzi’s account of how music changes moral character emphasizes the connection of music to dance, or at least to formalized movement: “In proceeding according to the markings and boundaries of the dance stage and conforming to the rhythm of the accompaniment, their ranks and formations become ordered, and their advances and retreats become uniform.”¹² Xunzi suggests that in observing an orderly dance, our own movements, through imitation, are made more orderly, and that these movements and feelings are essential to building (or destroying) good character.

Though it is necessary, music is not sufficient to make a person good. Participating in musical performances is just one step in the process of

⁷ See Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *A Song for One or Two: Music and the Concept of Art in Early China* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, 1982), 9.

⁸ Xunzi, “Discourse on Music,” in *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric Hutton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 219.

⁹ Xunzi, “Discourse on Music,” 219.

¹⁰ Mengzi, in *Mengzi: With Selections from the Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Bryan W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008), §1B1, 17.

¹¹ Xunzi, “Discourse on Music,” 220.

¹² Xunzi, “Discourse on Music,” 218–219.

becoming virtuous. Music's role in cultivating virtue comes early on in the learning process, and is both pre-reflective and automatic. Listening to and playing good music alters the feelings and body in such a way as to make one more receptive to moral instruction. Xunzi writes: "In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near the right person. Rituals and music provide proper models but give no precepts."¹³ According to Xunzi, music cannot by itself bring about ethical change in one's moral traits. Music's role in developing character is critically important, but it is centered on training the feelings and the body, not one's explicit beliefs.

The claim that music alters moral character is different from, but consistent with, the claim that music is expressive of the musician's moral character. The Kongzi (Confucius) of the *Analects* seems to have held both views. He believed that the music of great kings expresses their greatness: "The Master said of the Shao music, 'It is perfectly beautiful, and also perfectly good.' He said of the Wu music, 'It is perfectly beautiful, but not perfectly good.'"¹⁴ Shao music is the court music of the legendary sage-king Shun, while King Wu is a lesser king who ousted the evil king Zhou. So Shao music is superior to Wu music because the Shao kings were better, morally, than King Wu, and the music of each court expresses the moral character of its ruler. But Kongzi also believed that good music played a critical role in one's becoming a virtuous gentleman: "The Master said, 'Find inspiration in the *Odes*, take your place through ritual, and achieve perfection through music.'"¹⁵ Presumably, for Kongzi at least, the two claims are related: music alters moral character *because* it is the expression of moral character.

So, while Confucians explicitly rejected the moral relevance of the material benefits and costs of courtly music, they did care a great deal about a different kind of consequence: the effects of the music on the character of the listener (and the performer). Xunzi argued that good music (1) reflected the character of those who made it; (2) improved the moral character of those who listened and participated, in part through dance and movement; and (3) improved and reinforced community solidarity, through collective participation in music-making and dancing.

What this debate shows us is that there are very different and sometimes conflicting criteria we might use in judging art morally: do we concern

¹³ Xunzi, "An Exhortation to Learning," in *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, 6.

¹⁴ Confucius, *Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), §3.25, 28.

¹⁵ Confucius, *Analects*, §8.8, 80.

ourselves with the material costs and tangible benefits (if any) of engaging with art, or should we concern ourselves with the subtler, but potentially more profound, impacts of art on our moral character and sense of community?

1.2. Poetry in Ancient Greece

Plato's condemnation of poetry is infamous. To a Western audience, at least, Plato's views, and Aristotle's contrasting approach, to poetry will be far more familiar than the Confucian/Mohist debate. Nonetheless, it is worth going through these arguments briefly to highlight the critical issues at stake there.¹⁶

Plato's mistrust of the poets and of poetry is clear in many of his dialogues, including the *Ion*, the *Hippias Major*, and the *Laws*, but it is his arguments in *Republic* III and X that take the strongest and most philosophically provocative positions. While Plato criticizes painting and sculpture as well, his main target is poetry, and especially the poetry of Homer. Homer's poems formed the backbone of Athenian education, and Plato aims to uproot its influence completely. No city with a hope of being a just city can tolerate this kind of poetry, he believed.

Plato believed that poetry was dangerous first because (among other things) it can lead us to sympathize with fictional characters, and this sympathy meant that the feelings of the fictional characters infect the audience. He wrote:

When we listen to some hero in Homer or on the tragic stage moaning over his sorrows in a long tirade, or to a chorus beating their breasts as they chant a lament, you know how the best of us enjoy giving ourselves up to follow the performance with eager sympathy. The more a poet can move our feelings in this way, the better we think him.¹⁷

Poetry has the power to get the audience to feel what the character feels; this is the role of the poet as he sings. If the poetic performance is successful, the feelings of the audience and the feelings of the character will be the same,

¹⁶ For a fuller accounting and defense of Plato's arguments, see my "Infected by Evil," *Philosophical Explorations* 8, no. 2 (2005): 173–187.

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 605c–d.

and the audience may feel pity or grief, even when these feelings are inappropriate. Further, we may carry these inappropriate emotions home with us, and they can become part of our character and affect the way we act. Plato recognized how strongly we can feel about poetry, and the power that these passions can have: sympathetic attention to poetry, he said, “waters the growth of passions which should be allowed to wither away and sets them up in control.”¹⁸ These passions can become so strong that we can no longer control them in our everyday lives. Plato’s example is of a man who enjoys a story featuring comic characters acting foolishly, who then acts like a buffoon at home. Poetry can indirectly cause a person to become a more foolish, less serious person. Like Xunzi, Plato was convinced that art can shape our moral character in profound and significant ways. Unlike Xunzi, who thought that good music made us better, Plato did not see any positive role for good poetry. Poetry, he thought, was naturally inclined to appeal to the worst in us.

Further, Plato’s concern with poetry’s effects was narrowly focused on one particular kind of effect: our ability to reason. Plato argued that the soul had three parts: reason, spirit, and appetite. Reason was the best part of the soul and should “rule” over the other parts. Appetite was the worst part and the most inclined to lead a person into selfishness and vice. Poetry, Plato believed, was fundamentally opposed to reason and allied with appetite. His first argument for this view was that poetry is only capable of representing appetitive emotions. Characters who are weak and “irritable” can be imitated easily in poetry, but the wise and quiet type is not easy to imitate. These weak characters indulge in extreme expression of emotion, like grief and crass humor, which interfere with reasoned deliberation. The weak and irritable parts of ourselves are our worst parts, so a good person will not want to act in these ways. From this, he concludes that poetry appeals to the worst in us, not the best.

This argument is strengthened by another argument, one that depends on Plato’s theory of the forms. Since the perfect idea, or forms, of objects are the only things that are truly real, the knowledge that we have of forms is the only genuine knowledge. The highest function of reason is directed not at the sensible worlds, but at the forms themselves. Mimetic arts are “twice removed” from forms, since they are imitations of sensible things that are themselves imitations of the forms. It follows from this that the making of poetry is not governed by the use of reason. Poets, therefore, do not traffic in reason or in

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 606d.

truth: “Do you think that someone who could make both the thing imitated and its image would allow himself to be serious about making images . . . ?”¹⁹ Poets are incapable of *making* real things, so they sing stories about those things instead.

Aristotle is sometimes represented as offering an opposing view to his teacher Plato on the question of the value of the arts, but the truth is more complicated. Plato and Aristotle agreed on a number of points. In his *Politics*, Aristotle offers a view of the effects of music on moral character that is broadly similar to Plato’s, even though they disagree on certain particulars. Like Plato, Aristotle believes that bad music can have a pernicious influence on the development of our moral characters. However, when it comes to poetry and its effects on reason specifically, Aristotle does take an opposing view. Aristotle thinks that poetry can and does play a positive role in developing our capacity for reason. Though he does not reference Plato’s views specifically, it is reasonable to read Aristotle as offering a defense of poetry against Plato’s critique.

At the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that we enjoy poetry, and representation in general, precisely because of its role in learning. He writes:

Everyone delights in representations. An indication of this is what happens in fact: we delight in looking at the most detailed images of things which in themselves we see with pain, e.g. the shapes of the most despised wild animals even when dead. The cause of this is that learning is most pleasant. . . . For this reason they delight in seeing images, because it comes about that they learn as they observe, and infer what each thing is, e.g. that this person [represents] that one.²⁰

Aristotle’s argument is simple. His main goal in this passage is to explain why representations are pleasurable—and they are pleasurable, he thinks, because learning is pleasurable and engaging with representations requires learning. The education involved here is not very sophisticated: it is the experience of matching one thing with another. If, in seeing a statue, one recognizes it as a statue of Heracles, one must have noticed the various ways in which the statue resembles other representations of, including stories about, Heracles. The

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 599a–b.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics, with the Tractatus Coislinianus, A Hypothetical Reconstruction of Poetics II, and the Fragments of On Poets*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 48b9–17.

part of the statue that is shaped and colored to resemble a lionskin indicates that the statue represents Heracles. This, for Aristotle, is a simple inference and so an instance of learning. At the very least, artistic representations make use of our capacity for reason, then.

Aristotle's second claim involves a contrast between poetry and history. History, Aristotle argued, can instruct us about particular things that have happened. But only poetry can represent the kinds of things that *may* happen. For this reason, poetry can offer knowledge of counterfactuals, of possibilities—it can help us imagine ways that in which the world might yet be. Poetry has great cognitive value, he thought, in that it teaches us things of great importance: “For this reason poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history.”²¹

A third argument for poetry's cognitive value that is sometimes offered on Aristotle's behalf comes from his very brief remarks on catharsis. In perhaps the best-known and most-cited passage from the *Poetics*, Aristotle offers a definition of tragedy that emphasizes the importance of catharsis:

Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions.²²

Martha Nussbaum has argued for a cognitive interpretation of catharsis in this passage. She argues that we should understand catharsis in its sense as a kind of “clearing up”—in this case, a clarification of one's understanding. According to Nussbaum, the passage tells us that through tragedy, we come to understand better our own feelings of fear and pity. She writes: “These emotions can be genuine sources of understanding, showing the spectator possibilities that are there for good people.”²³ Richard Janko takes a similar view: “By responding emotionally to the representation, we can learn to develop the correct emotional

²¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 51b6–7.

²² Aristotle, *Poetics*, 49b25–30.

²³ Martha Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity,” in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 281.

responses.”²⁴ On this interpretation of the passage, poetry can help educate our moral emotions.

Aristotle offers us a number of reasons for thinking that poetry can be not just a source of pleasure, but also a resource for thinking well. We can learn to recognize connections between the representation and what is represented; we can learn about how the world might have been; and we can learn to understand our own emotions and their proper role. The central differences between Plato and Aristotle, then, concern whether poetry represents a danger to our ability to reason or a resource—are we going to be better, more careful thinkers if we consume poetry than if we do not? So we now have, in addition to the possibilities raised by Mozi and the Confucians, the question of how art might affect our ability to know and reason about moral matters.

1.3. Art and Propaganda in the Harlem Renaissance

Let us now turn to the “great debate” of the 1920s between W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain LeRoy Locke over whether black artists have a responsibility to make antiracist art.²⁵ The heart of the disagreement between Locke and Du Bois lies, most importantly and most interestingly, in their views of the artist’s relationship to values. Du Bois and Locke each played important roles in shaping the art of the Harlem Renaissance, primarily through their rival editorships—Du Bois edited the NAACP’s journal *The Crisis*, and Locke edited the influential collection *The New Negro*. Without ever mentioning one another’s names, each published brief but important critiques of the other’s views: first Du Bois, in “Criteria of Negro Art,” and then Locke, in “Art or Propaganda?” Du Bois argued that it was inevitable that art would have moral and political meaning, and that the artist should not attempt to resist this fact. He wrote: “What has beauty to do with truth and goodness—with the facts of the world and the right actions of men? . . . here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.”²⁶ He argued that antiracist propaganda was morally *necessary* to counter the dominant narrative of a racist society: “The white public today demands from its

²⁴ Janko, “Introduction,” in Aristotle, *Poetics*, xviii. It is worth noting that some other scholars do not interpret catharsis in this way. For example, see Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, 315–340.

²⁵ For additional background and further detail, see Leonard Harris, “The Great Debate: W.E.B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic,” *Philosophia Africana* 7, no 1 (2004): 15–39.

²⁶ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” §10.

artists, literary and pictorial, racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice, as far as colored races are concerned, and it will pay for no other.”²⁷

In his book *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*, Paul Taylor offers a careful and compelling reconstruction of Du Bois’s essay.²⁸ Taylor is concerned that we understand Du Bois not as a quasi-Platonist, viewing Beauty and Goodness as two aspects of a single perfect abstract object, but as a pragmatist in a Deweyian mold. When Du Bois speaks of beauty’s connection to both truth and goodness, he does sometimes sound a bit Platonic, particularly when quoted out of context: “The apostle of beauty thus becomes the apostle of truth and right.”²⁹ However, Taylor shows that the best way to understand Du Bois’s way of linking beauty, truth, and goodness is as offering an expressive view of artistic activity that brings together the moral and the aesthetic through action—not as discovering a metaphysical unity of goodness and beauty.

According to Taylor, Du Bois offers two main arguments for this conclusion: the “inner compulsion” and the “outer compulsion.” The first argument begins with the claim that all people, including artists, are “social products, or *expressions*, of their social milieu.”³⁰ Second, Du Bois claims that artists unavoidably express themselves through art-making. When artists set out to create something, the work they create will always bear the mark of the maker, and everything that made the makers who they are. This self-expression cannot be done without “recognizing [the artist’s] immersion in the grand, moving stream of human social life in history.”³¹ In other words, artists are not merely expressing themselves in art but also expressing that the social roots of those selves—their history, culture, and so on. So artists must always express their social location and its moral and political meanings in their art. This is what Du Bois called the “inner compulsion” that leads artists inevitably to include moral and political values in their art. An artist will be led by personal impulses to create art that reflects the artist’s whole self.

²⁷ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” §29.

²⁸ Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), esp. Chapter 3, “Beauty to Set the World Right: The Politics of Black Aesthetics,” 77–103. The interpretation of Du Bois throughout this chapter is deeply indebted to Taylor’s interpretation and reconstruction.

²⁹ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” §25.

³⁰ Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 92.

³¹ Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 92.

The second argument begins with Du Bois's assertion that artists always aim to gain "human sympathy and interest." To this, he added that one cannot gain human sympathy and interest without engaging with ethical and political standards. An artist creates art in order to connect with an audience, and the audience engages with art by deploying a full range of values—economic, aesthetic, moral, political, and so on. So artists cannot ignore ethical principles in creating art if they hope to speak to an audience. This is what Du Bois calls the "outer compulsion": the artist is led to incorporate moral meaning in the work through the need to reach the audience. Both the inner and outer compulsion rightly lead artists to integrate politics into their art (that is, to make their art propaganda). Taylor writes: "Du Bois' view was that blacks will be seen as human, and black artists will properly disclose the human, when their art eschews prejudgment and reveals the complex, mediated truth of human being as it achieves concrete expression in the specific contexts of black life."³²

In summary, Du Bois thinks that art and ethics are rightly united because of certain facts about artistic creation: that artists, in producing art, express who they are and seek to communicate with an audience. Since both artist and audience are whole persons with cultural, moral, and political parts, the works that artists produce cannot be separated from ethical values if they are to express themselves and reach an audience.

Like Du Bois, Locke is also a philosophical pragmatist who was deeply influenced by John Dewey. But Locke's philosophical view paints a very different picture of artists and their relationship to values. Locke believed that for black artists to aim to create propaganda would be damaging both politically and aesthetically. In his short essay, "Art or Propaganda?" Locke makes two principal arguments for the claims that black artists should *not* produce propaganda but instead engage in "free and purely artistic expression."³³

Locke's first argument is that artists who devote themselves to producing good (antiracist) propaganda are nonetheless constrained by the terms of the debate—that is, by having to answer the racist propaganda of the dominant society. "My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. . . . It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect."³⁴ According to Locke, a work of

³² Taylor, *Black is Beautiful*, 99.

³³ Alain LeRoy Locke, "Art or Propaganda?," *Harlem* 1 (1928): 13.

³⁴ Locke, "Art or Propaganda?," 12.

propaganda cannot succeed in achieving the artist's aims. Black artists who attempt to use propaganda to put forward a positive view of black life will fail because their work will always be seen as reactive and powerless—"It harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates." These artists (and those on whose behalf they work) will suffer a loss of self-respect. What's more, the artwork will fail to achieve the artist's aims because haranguing, cajoling, and so on, undermine any sense of balance or elegance. Such a work will be crude and dull.

Locke's second argument is that the "fundamental purpose of art" is to serve as a "tap root of vigorous, flourishing living."³⁵ Vigorous, flourishing lives require free discussion. Propaganda, on the other hand, is one-sided and prejudging. Since one-sidedness and prejudging of artworks are incompatible with free discussion, propaganda is incompatible with the fundamental purpose of art. Art that exemplifies the values of free discussion and expression, by contrast, would fight conformity and dogmatism, and ultimately break the cycle of propaganda and anti-propaganda. Truth, he said, would follow beauty. "After Beauty, let Truth come into the Renaissance picture,—a later cue, but a welcome one."³⁶

It may appear that the debate between Du Bois and Locke is easily resolved. Du Bois and Locke seem to be using the word "propaganda" to mean two different things. For Du Bois, any artwork that authentically expresses the self and seeks to connect with an audience is necessarily propaganda; for Locke, propaganda is one-sided messaging, art created with clear political goals. Locke's objections to what he calls "propaganda" do not clearly apply to the "propaganda" that Du Bois favors. So, one might conclude, there is no real conflict between these two—Du Bois can agree to condemn the kind of "propaganda" that Locke hated, but still insist that artists are bound by inner and outer compulsion to produce art that has moral meaning.

However, the disagreement between Du Bois and Locke goes deeper. Embedded in each of these views is a distinct picture of artists and their relationship to value. Paul Taylor describes Du Bois's view this way: "Artists, like everyone else, are dialectically enmeshed in wider webs of meaning concerning the true and the just, and must create themselves as individuals by working out their orientations to these networks."³⁷ On Du Bois's view, artists have relationships to values, and these relationships are made manifest

³⁵ Locke, "Art or Propaganda?," 12.

³⁶ Locke, "Art or Propaganda?," 12.

³⁷ Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful*, 97.

in their art. By contrast, Leonard Harris has argued that Locke thinks that values like beauty are “unfinished” and that the artist does not merely create art in response to a preexisting set of values.³⁸ Artists do not find themselves in relationships with values; they must also complete and produce those values. The values are just as tangled up in us as we are in them.

The crux of the debate between Locke and Du Bois, then, is the question of the relationship of the artist to moral values. Are artists shaped by their moral values, and therefore inevitably set up to express them through art (as Kongzi also believed)? Or are artists shapers of values, using their own creativity and freedom to make choices about how different values might be seen and understood? For Locke and Du Bois, the critical matter is how artists should orient themselves toward a set of moral values. So yet another way of thinking about the moral value of art is to look at the artist as a moral person, and consider whether the moral character of the artist affects the moral value we should attribute to the art itself.

1.4. Conclusions

This quick and rough sampling of some interesting moments in philosophical history highlights three main kinds of issues, to which we will return later in the book. Here are the issues:

1. What are the costs and the benefits of art, both in terms of material resources and in terms of its effects on the characters of those who make and enjoy it? This is a problem that we will turn to next, in Chapter 2, but the problem will also affect our discussions in Chapters 3 and 4, as we look at evaluating art on the basis of its effects on the audience.
2. What is the connection between the moral character of the artist and the moral status of the artwork? Is the art of vicious artists tainted by their bad character? What is the relationship between the values of the artist and the values in the work? This is the focus of our discussion in Chapter 3, which takes up the problem of immoral artists whose work seems to be stained by their origins. Can we judge artworks by looking at their creators?

³⁸ The interpretation of Locke’s view presented here draws heavily on the work of Leonard Harris, “The Great Debate.” Locke’s value theory is described in some detail in Chapter 6.

3. Does art stand in opposition to reason, or can it help us learn? Specifically, does art interfere with moral learning, or can it make us better moral learners? This is the focus of Chapter 4. Here we want to know whether or not art can be morally judged on the basis of its epistemic role.

Throughout the next three chapters, the three historical debates just surveyed serve as a background and source of examples and arguments. The goal is to think through the principal ways in which we might come reasonably to think that an artwork is either morally good or morally bad.