

Defending aesthetic education

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DOI:

[10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

D'olimpio, L 2021, 'Defending aesthetic education', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, pp. 1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267>

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To cite this article: Laura D'Olimpio (2021): DEFENDING AESTHETIC EDUCATION, British Journal of Educational Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267](https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267>



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Published online: 25 Aug 2021.



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DEFENDING AESTHETIC EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I offer a defence of aesthetic education in terms of aesthetic experience, claiming that aesthetic experience and art appreciation is a vital component of a flourishing life. Given schools have an important role to play in helping prepare young people for their adult lives, it is crucial they should consider how best to equip students with the means to achieve a flourishing life. It is on these grounds I defend arts education as compulsory across the curriculum. In order to adopt this position, I firstly critically engage with two competing defences of including the arts on the curriculum on the basis of firstly, the role art has to play in supporting self-expression, and secondly, a defence of the arts in relation to their role in supporting moral improvement. After explaining why these arguments fail to do the work required to defend aesthetic education as thoroughly as is needed, I turn to the defence based on aesthetic experience because it allows for a defence of the arts to be made on the basis of art's distinctive value.

Keywords: Aesthetic education, aesthetic experience, expressivism, moral education, art education, character education

INTRODUCTION

a deep, lifelong engagement with the aesthetic cannot, I venture to say, be duplicated by any other kind of seriousness. Indeed, the various definitions of beauty come at least as close to a plausible characterization of virtue, and of a fuller humanity, as the attempts to define goodness as such.

– Susan Sontag, 2007, p. 12.

Education in the arts and art theory is vital. There have been those who have sought to defend arts education and aesthetic education, but more work is required in this area and on this defence. In this paper I will make and defend a philosophical argument for the necessity of teaching the skills and techniques of art making, appreciation and art theory (which includes art history) to all school-aged students, from pre-primary to high school, on the basis of its distinctive value. I will firstly examine and critique two well regarded arguments that seek to defend arts education on the basis of firstly, the role art has to play in supporting self-expression, and secondly, a defence of the arts in relation to their role in supporting moral improvement. I will then offer my own defence of aesthetic education in terms of aesthetic experience. I claim that aesthetic

ISSN 0007-1005 (print)/ISSN 1467-8527 (online)

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2021.1960267>

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experience and art appreciation is a vital component of a flourishing life and if education has a role to play in preparing students to lead flourishing and meaningful lives, then we must include aesthetic education on the curriculum.

Such an argument is timely, given the so-called crisis in the arts and humanities, with declining student numbers in subjects that do not have a direct vocational correlative, and increased focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects. This trend is reflected in societal approaches to measurement and managerialism, further borne out by funding cuts to the arts and the humanities and a public and political rhetoric that does not seem to value them. There is a need to argue for why the arts and aesthetic education is valuable, and why they should not only be compulsory on educational curricula (as, in many instances, they are included), but also why the arts should be valued and properly resourced.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Allow me to clarify the terms I am using to begin with, before delving into the arguments in defence of aesthetic education. In terms of whether something (an object or a performance, for instance) may be described as a work of art, I make use of an analytical, classificatory approach to outline a definition of art that sees art as an open concept, while not including everything in its category. I define art as an object that is intentionally created by a person or persons ('the artist') with the primary function or purpose of producing an aesthetic experience for those who engage with it. Such an object is created and received in a context because it is a human endeavour. For now I shall leave aside the tricky cases positioned at the edges of my definition (such as objects that may not have previously been artworks, such as cave paintings, which are now treated as art), because each instance may be judged on a case by case basis on this definition and I need not resolve all the controversial 'but, is it art?' examples for my theory to be considered viable.

Experiences that result from engaging with artworks are dynamic and complex. Consequently, the concept of aesthetic experience is notoriously difficult to pin down. As Beardsley (1982, p. 81) explains, a person is having an aesthetic experience 'if and only if the greater part of his [sic] mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated.' Such aesthetic experiences are emotive as well as cognitive. They involve the intellect as well as the emotions and may be experiences of beauty, the sublime, being moved, feeling wonder or a sense of harmony and delight. Not all art objects (or indeed, all objects) may potentially produce an aesthetic experience, but neither does my account rule this out.

Classically, Frank Sibley (1965, p. 137) connects aesthetics with perception. Quoted by Collinson (1992, p. 113), Sibley draws an immediate link between the work of art and how it is experienced:

Aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to *see* the grace or unity of a work, *hear* the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, *notice* the gaudiness of a colour scheme, *feel* the power of a novel, its mood or its uncertainty of tone . . . the crucial thing is to see, hear, feel.

Most aestheticians use positive superlatives in order to describe the aesthetic experience and Collinson notes such experience is highly valued:

aesthetic experience at its highest and best is arresting, intense and utterly engrossing; that when fully achieved it seizes one's whole mind or imagination and conveys whatever it does convey so vividly that the result is delight and knowledge. (Collinson, 1992, p. 115).

Yet, aesthetic experience varies widely. And often when we try to describe the experience associated with a certain object (a painting, or a dance performance, or a beautiful sunset), we quickly find ourselves describing the object of the experience itself.

In terms of defining aesthetic experience, we must do away with the idea that aesthetic experience is a unique definable *kind* of experience, as the debates between Monroe Beardsley and George Dickie have successfully proven (See Iseminger (2003) for an overview of this debate). By the 1980s, Beardsley changed his mind, from defending an internalist theory focused on the phenomenological quality of the experience to admitting that an externalist theory, which focuses instead on the features of the object experienced, must be accurate. After all, it makes no sense to defend an aesthetic experience if the qualities of that experience are not connected to features of the object with which is being engaged. Yet listing such features is tricky given the variety of art media and accompanying experiences. Thus, most aestheticians now hold that:

an object has aesthetic value insofar as it affords valuable experience when correctly perceived. This view—which has come to be called *empiricism about aesthetic value*, given that it reduces aesthetic value to the value of aesthetic experience—has attracted many advocates over the last several years (Shelley, 2017).

As such, my theory is also a form of empiricism about aesthetic value and aesthetic experience is simply experience with aesthetic content, 'i.e., an experience of an object as having the aesthetic features that it has' (Shelley, 2017). In this way, I follow Beardsley in claiming that an aesthetic experience results when one's mental activity is concentrated on the 'sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object' (i.e. an artwork, performance, or natural beauty such as a sunset or lush forest or the beach) which brings pleasure to the perceiver.¹

Theoretically and also educationally, my focus is on art objects that potentially afford a certain kind of experience when engaged with in a particular

manner. For an artwork to fail to do so may be due to the lack of artist's skill or execution, the context in which the artwork is received (which may include socio-historical or ethical factors), and/or the attitude of the receiver of the artwork. Each of these elements; the skill of the artist, the presentation or display of the art object, as well as the reception of the work (including, specifically, the attitude of the audience) requires a form of learning, training or education.

The education of artists and receivers of artworks is therefore a central issue within aesthetics, which includes both practical and theoretical aspects. Various defences have been offered for the arts and aesthetic education and here I will focus on two such arguments. I shall start with the expressivist defence of art as a form of self-expression to which all people should have access, before considering whether the arts should be defended because they may support moral education.

THE EXPRESSIVIST VIEW OF ART

The first argument I shall articulate has stood the test of time (as has the view of art as imitation or a form of representation). The expressivist account of art, as articulated by Clive Bell (1915), Roger Fry (1920) and R G Collingwood (1938), holds that art should only seek to express and arouse distinct emotions. In this way, art making is a form of self-expression and those engaged in this endeavour can seek to better understand and express themselves via art media. For defenders of this position, the reason we should include the arts, particularly art making, on the curriculum is because it is important that students learn to express themselves in various creative and constructive ways, and art media offer ways for people to do so that are unavailable in other subject areas.

The means by which we express ourselves, our ideas and emotions in other subjects such as history, mathematics and science are restricted by discipline specific norms, and in many subjects the freedom for self-expression is extremely limited or even absent, particularly when it comes to expressing emotions. Furthermore, some subjects require students to memorise facts and rules and repeat or apply these in order to achieve good marks and demonstrate the requisite knowledge of which that subject consists. In such subjects there is no room for creative, distinctive self-expression or even an emotional response to the subject matter.

If learning how to appropriately, creatively, or uniquely express one's own feelings and thoughts is deemed valuable, the arts seem to be an excellent place to endeavour to do so. The arts are conducive to such self-expression, particularly given emotions are often difficult to accurately portray and art media offer various abstract and creative ways to achieve this. At a time in young children's lives when their linguistic capabilities are under-developed, art as a form of self-expression offers a new artistic vocabulary that is engaging and playful. For

teenagers, struggling with self-expression as new feelings arise as they grow and develop, the arts can offer a cathartic medium and the chance to be 'heard' which is often deeply desired at this stage in a young person's life.

This argument assumes that self-expression is a good thing and the arts can assist students with this. This argument focusses primarily on self-expression via arts-making, more so than the reception and critique of the arts. Having said that, on this view enjoying the arts may also allow students to feel a cathartic form of self-expression through the identification with the feelings expressed in artworks with which they engage and enjoy. All students should be given the opportunity to create artworks in school because they may not have this chance outside of school, either through their families, friends, or work or social lives. They may not realise they have a special talent for self-expression using one of the art media available i.e. music, drama, painting, sculpture, writing, dance, etc. and even if they are not going to become an artist or even if they are not particularly talented in any art medium, they may find the art medium gives them the chance to express themselves in a way not otherwise afforded to them and this adds a beneficial and positive mode of self-expression to their lives.

However, there are a couple of issues with this argument. The first is the assumption that self-expression is obviously good, valuable, important and perhaps, more significantly, always so. Wrapped up in this idea is the question of whether all forms of expression and all utterances are worthwhile and valuable. This raises the issue of *who* is expressing *what*, and *who* is receiving the work. We simply cannot say self-expression is inherently ethically good, or intrinsically aesthetically good either.

Greene (2001, p. 19) notes:

the arts have been treated either as didactic forms or as decorative devices in education, intended either to improve or to motivate . . . Art-making and creativity has often been treated therapeutically, sometimes for the sake of pure self-expression or sensory play, both of which are valuable but have little to do with the arts. They are often located in the affective realm – with the implication that this is an alternative to the cognitive realm. Commonly, the arts are seen as a self-indulgence – elitist, and the privilege of well-funded schools.

Even if the arts are a vehicle for self-expression, this is certainly not the only or main reason school children should learn artistic skills and techniques. Self-expression may seem like an obvious educational aim in the contemporary, Western liberal context in which we find ourselves, yet creating art is about so much more than this. As soon as we consider artworks and forms of art and craft making from various times and cultures, we realise they do not always aim at self-expression or distinctive emotional expression. Art is also about belonging, tradition, sharing knowledge and expertise as well as craftsmanship.²

Furthermore, self-expression for the expressivist is about expressing emotion whereas art can express ideas. Artworks are not always about expressing one's feelings; they may be cognitive and cerebral (i.e. conceptual artworks),

they may be about perfection of form and technique (i.e. sculpture and still life paintings), they may be about socio-political and moral critique, all of which is broader than self-expression. Self-expression does not do the arts justice in encapsulating the function or purpose of art and ultimately the expressivist offers an elitist conception of art that excludes mass art and craft.

In educational terms, if art is only important due to the role it may play in assisting students to express themselves and their distinct emotions, it may be abandoned if a better way to express oneself is discovered. 'Better' may be defined in various ways according to the political, ethical, and social mores of the time. It may be decided that it is better to express oneself efficiently, or less creatively, more direct and to the point, in a less atmospheric fashion, seriously . . . and so on. All of these are possible options that may be fashionable or useful to a society and could well conflict with the modes of expression the arts are seen to endorse. The expression found in the arts may even be deemed, as Plato worried, antithetical to important pursuits such as the search for truth and wisdom.

Self-expression alone will not do the work required for defending the inclusion of the arts on the curriculum. Yet it may be that even if this isn't the reason we should include the arts on the school curriculum, we may value and applaud the opportunities provided by the arts for students' self-expression. Yet, as Biesta (2017) notes, this self-understanding will not occur if one only seeks to express themselves; it must be supplemented by listening and receiving the perspectives of others, thus allowing for a dialogical or what he terms an existential experience.

ART AS MORAL FORMATION

Another argument for including the arts on the curriculum is due to the benefits the arts confer in terms of students' moral development. Some of the very first books written for children were intentionally morally instructive, and philosophers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, (1792/2004) highlighted the important role of stories in teaching children moral rules and appropriate etiquette. Contemporary arguments in favour of the arts developing young people's moral dispositions often align with the virtue ethics tradition that sees the cultivation of moral habits as not just a good thing to do but vital for leading a good and pleasant (flourishing – *eudaimonia*) life. This argument will often refer to the power of music and narrative artworks in particular to support the habituation of relevant moral emotions such as sympathy, empathy and compassion, which assist the moral agent to treat others with care, respect and attentive concern for their well-being.

For instance, Martha Nussbaum follows Iris Murdoch and Henry James in defending novels as a source of moral knowledge. This account understands moral truth as wider than that of a solely propositional account, whereby

knowing *how* and knowing *what it is like* are just as important as knowing *that*. Certain novels, they claim ‘calls forth our “active sense of life”, which is our moral faculty’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 162). In this way, readers may develop compassionate responses through caring, imaginative engagement with aesthetically and ethically good works of narrative art. Nussbaum argues that if we engage in a sympathetic manner with the characters and scenarios depicted within narrative artworks, we may practise a ‘loving attitude’ or caring disposition that is useful in application to the real world. By practising this moral attitude in relation to characters in stories, we are protected in a safe fictional space which makes it easier to try and imaginatively engage with other perspectives:

The aesthetic activity, which takes place in a safe and protected ‘potential space’ where our own safety is not immediately threatened, harnesses the pleasure of exploring to the neediness and insufficiency that is its object, thus making our limitations pleasing, and at least somewhat less threatening, to ourselves. (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 244).

Similarly, Iris Murdoch claims that, in art:

we are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated, and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all. Art transcends selfish and obsessive limitations of personality and can enlarge the sensibility of its consumer. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 84).

Practising such loving responses may eventually result in this moral disposition (in which compassion is defined as a rational emotion and a virtue) becoming habituated and, over time, engrained in our character. Yet Nussbaum points out that her argument does not apply to *all* works of art, or all narrative artworks:

One can think of works of art which can be contemplated reasonably well without asking any urgent questions about how one should live. Abstract formalist paintings are sometimes of this character, and some intricate but non-programmatic works of music (though by no means all). But it seems highly unlikely that a responsive reading of any complex literary work is utterly detached from concerns about time and death, about pain and the transcendence of pain, and so on – all the material of ‘how one should live’ questions as I have conceived it. (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 358)

The kind of effect stories can have is difficult to quantify or articulate in any more than a correlative manner, particularly the moral impact of narratives. Any causal impact of stories must be subjective and contextual, yet it seems reasonable that the engaging nature of storytelling is something that appeals to human psychology. Stories and images can activate emotions and stimulate ideas which can, in turn, motivate action. Furthermore, narrative artworks may be understood by people of varying education and age levels and, in this way, is much

more inclusive than, say, a technical work of moral philosophy published in a journal that may only be accessed by those with subscriptions or appropriate institutional affiliations. On this argument, we can defend stories as central to education, if not moral education, and also make a case for why teachers are required to assist their students to learn how to engage with such stories in a particular way. Yet there are some limitations to this argument, even if one is sympathetic to it.

Firstly, Nussbaum, Murdoch and James are referring to a small number of *aesthetically and ethically good* narrative artworks. Which invites questions about *which* artworks should be used in educational settings, how we judge them, both aesthetically and ethically, and how we should use them, pedagogically, in educational settings. (I have written about this elsewhere (D'Olimpio, 2018; D'Olimpio and Peterson, 2018), so I will set aside this debate for now). Secondly, this kind of argument doesn't refer to writing stories, or engaging with the many other artforms and varied media. It refers to *reading* as a potentially moral act. Which is lovely, but that only defends the inclusion of books and stories on the curriculum, not of art more generally, and the necessity to *read* itself already justifies this claim. While there are others who refer to the morally educative potential of music and poetry, there is a similar problem. Again, these arguments refer to using certain artworks in specific ways rather than focussing on why creating and appreciating artworks *per se* is an important thing to do and thus the argument doesn't defend aesthetic education *per se*. Thus, this defence of narrative artworks on the basis of moral education may well be a positive claim I am happy to support and may offer additional good reasons to include (some) arts on the curriculum, but nevertheless the argument does not go far enough for our purposes here to justify aesthetic education.

David Carr (2005) provides an exception here, defending the inclusion of the arts and literature on to the curriculum in order to help students make sense of and cultivate their own appropriate cognitive and emotive responses which, in turn, improves their character. His argument concludes:

the power of art and literature to deepen and extend our understanding of ourselves; the world and our relations with others seems clear enough, and may be taken to vindicate the insight . . . that such studies have a key role to play in the wider moral (as well as aesthetic) formation of human virtue, character and sensibility.

Assuming we are able to defend the creation and reception of the arts as a tool for moral improvement, should this justify the inclusion of art and aesthetic education on the curriculum? This idea is not a new one given that art has historically been used as a mode of moral formation and communication, particularly imparting religious ideas, mores and lessons to the general public. Up until the 18th Century and the Enlightenment, paintings were full of religious symbolism that 'read' as illustrated virtuous texts. Yet history also reminds us that certain texts, symbols and ideas were deemed virtuous and praised,

commissioned and displayed while others were censored and destroyed. Such decisions were made by those in positions of power and authority. So the question of *which* artworks and *which* or *whose* morals is inescapable here, and this inevitably highlights the concern to do with whose voices are neglected or omitted.

In fact, I have a lot of sympathy for the idea of using artworks to cultivate compassionate responses in young people. I *do* think there are ways to find good (aesthetically and ethically), inclusive artworks and use them in interesting and creative ways in educational spaces. So I am not against the argument that we can and do use art in morally formative ways (and yes, I acknowledge that this isn't always done in a virtuous manner!). Nevertheless, this is only a supplementary argument defending the inclusion of arts on the curriculum, and one concern is that, in this argument, the arts are being defended instrumentally. The arts are being offered up as a tool for moral formation, rather than being valued for their own sake for the aesthetic experience they afford.

Any instrumental defence of the arts is worrying to artists and arts educators. Many theorists have written about the damage being done to education, to the humanities, to the arts and creative industries through neoliberal values, increased managerialism and our age of measurement that sees harmful reductionist tendencies requiring everything be counted, measured, tallied, and justified in economic terms (Apple, 2018; Biesta, 2017; Brighouse *et al.*, 2018). A significant issue in such a reductionist approach is that practical and economic values become the (often sole) focus of what is considered to be 'good'. This excludes aesthetic value, and leads to the reduction in resources (time and money) allocated to the arts in favour of a focus on more vocational subjects, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).³ On this narrow view, it is difficult to justify 'artist' as an economically viable or practical career option. Yet, government reports often require such testable criteria (such as literacy and numeracy) to be reported on in order to justify the subject in educational terms. As such, in the 2013 OECD publication, *Art For Art's Sake?: The Impact of Arts Education*, the authors provide an overview of empirical research in arts education since 1950 and note that 'research on arts education represents only a tiny share of educational research' (p. 256).

Winner *et al.* (2013) detail three central findings from the literature on arts education. Firstly, there is strong evidence that specific forms of arts education positively impact upon the development of certain skills. For instance, theatre education leads to improved reading and literacy skills. However, they note that theatre is not systematically taught in all classes or schools. Secondly, there is insufficient empirical research done on the correlation between arts education and specific skills such as critical thinking, creativity, motivation, and self-identity to be able to make an evidence-based claim that education in the arts positively improves and impacts upon such attributes. Yet this is not to deny any impact either, given the relatively small amount of research that has been done

on such correlations and how difficult it is to measure these effects. They point out that arts educators and researchers ought to be nuanced in any assertions they make with respect to the positive outcomes of arts education while also being mindful of poor arts education (which may be due to a variety of factors and highlights important issues such as teacher training, resources, and curricula requirements). Thirdly, they claim, even if the arts and arts education does not lead to innovation and improved skills that are measurable in quantifiable ways, the arts and arts education nevertheless should occupy an important place within our schools and educational curriculum because art is a human experience. They passionately conclude:

Ultimately, even though we find some evidence of the impact of arts education on skills outside of the arts, the impact of arts education on other non-arts skills and on innovation in the labour market is not necessarily the most important justification for arts education in today's curricula. The arts have been in existence since the earliest humans, are parts of all cultures, and are a major domain of human experience, just like science, technology, mathematics, and humanities. In that respect, they are important in their own rights for education. Students who gain mastery in an art form may discover their life's work or their life's passion. But for all children, the arts allow a different way of understanding than the sciences and other academic subjects. Because they are an arena without right and wrong answers, they free students to explore and experiment. They are also a place to introspect and find personal meaning. (p. 265).

It is this third and final assertion that I believe requires substantiation and defence; namely, that the arts and associated cultural awareness is vital for living a good life. The arts – learning, making, critiquing, and receiving the arts – is a *vital* component in a *flourishing life*. This is why we need the arts on the school curriculum. And two thumbs up if the arts *also* support students' self-expression, their moral development, their appreciation of the great artists throughout history, etcetera. But how might we defend the necessity of aesthetic education on the grounds that it is vital to a well-lived life?

THE CASE FOR AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The arguments defending the inclusion of aesthetic education on the curriculum for reasons of self-expression or due to their role in supporting students' moral development and character formation are inadequate to the task. While each position has something to offer, and they usefully support and supplement my defence of aesthetic education, they are simply not foundational enough for my purposes. I claim aesthetic education is necessary due to its ability to offer, invite and invoke aesthetic experience. Such meaningful aesthetic experiences are integral to a flourishing life and therefore, educators have a responsibility to teach students that they may participate in such experiences.

A key assumption I make that I will not defend here is that I see flourishing as the aim of education (for defences of this claim see Brighouse, 2006;

Brighouse *et al.*, 2018; Reiss and White, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2017). A constituent component of a flourishing life includes aesthetic experiences. This is certainly not denied by prominent advocates of education for flourishing. Yet more focussed attention is required as to why the arts should be valued as part of a flourishing life, and what educational demands that necessitates. When listing specific educational goods and capacities, for instance, Brighouse *et al.* (2018, p. 27) identify: capacity for economic productivity; capacity for personal autonomy; capacity for democratic competence; capacity for healthy personal relationships; capacity to treat others as equals and the capacity for personal fulfilment. While all six capacities contribute to flourishing lives, the space for arts education is within the capacity for personal fulfilment. The authors write:

Healthy personal relationships are important for flourishing, but so too are complex and satisfying labor and projects that engage one's physical, aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual faculties. People find great satisfaction in music, literature, and the arts; games and sports; mathematics and science; and religious practice. In these and other activities, they exercise and develop their talents and meet challenges ... School is a place in which children's horizons can be broadened. They can be exposed to – and can develop enthusiasms for and competence in – activities that they would never have encountered through familial and communal networks and that sometimes suit them better than any they would have encountered in those ways. The capacity to find joy and fulfillment from experiences and activities is at the heart of a flourishing life (Brighouse *et al.*, 2018, p. 26-27).

It is through schooling that some students are going to encounter things they love, are good at and may turn into their life's passion or career or simply an enjoyable hobby that adds much personal meaning and fulfilment to their lives. Not the least among such possibilities are the arts. And being inducted into the techniques and skills involved in arts creation, appreciation and critique by an experienced teacher or artist will make all the difference in terms of the knowledge and understanding a student will likely gain in relation to the arts and that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. It is this appreciation of the value the arts may afford that can open students up to being more receptive to aesthetic experiences than they may naturally already be.

Similarly, Reiss and White (2013) see the importance of offering students various, diverse experiences that they may or may not stumble across elsewhere, in order for individuals to ascertain whether they have the skill, passion, talent, or enjoyment of that activity that could lead to personal meaning making and fulfilment. For instance, they justify the inclusion of *good* literature on the curriculum for its educational qualities as well as due to its being an intrinsically valuable activity. 'As an activity pursued for its own sake, reading literature scores well, then, as a contributor to a flourishing life', Reiss and White (2013, p. 18) claim. This is in part because good narrative artworks, as Nussbaum and Murdoch noted earlier, assist us in recognising and appreciating that human nature is shared between ourselves and others, including others who initially

seem quite different to us. Reiss and White (2013, p. 17) make the further claim that we are invited to take pleasure in this reflection through our engagement with literature, and this echoes a similar sympathetic engagement with others in our non-fictional world: ‘This is inseparable from reflectiveness about our own and other people’s values, about their priorities, and conflicts between them as our life unfolds’. Yet this defence is of good literature and does not apply to all other artforms or media in the same way, and it also assumes a correlative link whereby the sympathetic attitude cultivated in relation to fictional characters in works of good literature will then be applied by the reader to real world scenarios and people encountered in real life.

As such, some of this defence of good literature (as opposed to ‘Pulp fiction, soap operas, and B movies’ which may be enjoyable but less educational⁴) reminds us of the arguments about the role for narrative art in moral education. Nussbaum also defends reading good literature as a moral act and argues ‘certain novels are, irreplaceably, works of moral philosophy. But I shall go further ... the novel can be a paradigm of moral activity’ (Nussbaum, 1990, p. 148). It seems as though the intrinsic value of the act of reading good literature and of ‘wholehearted and successful engagement’ with other art forms is based on personal enjoyment and fulfilment which includes this moral activity – a cultivation of one’s moral sensibility. And in this way Reiss and White offer a composite argument of sorts,⁵ perhaps because the flourishing life is complex, subtle and, to some degree, subjective.⁶ So, we find a defence of compulsory arts education due to the worthiness of the activities themselves,⁷ and such activities are required for a flourishing life, but there is an additional component of the meaningfulness of engagement of this kind, namely, that it assists us to understand ourselves and others in the world. This understanding is connected to moral education, and it is this argument as a whole that is taken to justify making arts education compulsory:

To go back to more traditional curriculum activities that should be compulsory, enjoying non-literary arts – paintings, sculpture, architecture, film, music, dance – shares many of the same features as engagement in literature. Experiencing the more subtle and exquisite delights of these areas is helped enormously by induction into them by experts. People introduced to their various forms and genres tend in adult life to prize this kind of activity as part of what makes their life worth living. Like verbal arts – but more tacitly, through sound and sight and touch – these have the power of constantly reconnecting us with background thoughts and feelings about the strangeness and fleetingness of our being in the world. It is because these arts are so central to our flourishing that there should be a substantial place for them on a compulsory basis. This is compatible, of course, with optional classes in the particular arts, within this system (Reiss and White, 2013, p. 20).

Yet while some artworks connect us to the world in which we find ourselves, the aesthetic experience associated with other art objects may take us away from the banality of reality. Not all artworks have moral meaning (as we, along with

Nussbaum have already noted), and thus the intrinsic value of wholehearted engagement with such artworks cannot always be that it helps us understand the world even if it sometimes or often does, and even if we experience personal meaning as a result of such engagement.

Instead, I contend that such wholehearted engagement with art and the distinctive value of such activities (which include art making as well as reception) is in light of the aesthetic experience they afford. Such experiences are personally fulfilling, meaningful, and possibly sublime, and the flourishing life includes such aesthetic experiences.

The arguments offered by Brighouse et al., and Reiss and White certainly support my case in favour of aesthetic education, yet I wish to further justify and substantiate the claim that all school-aged students should be taught the skills and techniques of art making, appreciation and art theory due its distinctive value. This distinctive aesthetic value is a component of a flourishing, well-lived life. Meaningful activities, from which individuals choose what they wish to do, of which painting, dancing, writing or acting may be one option, only suggests students should be exposed to these things in case they wish to choose the activity in question. Yet *every* student will benefit from being exposed to and taught how to appreciate aesthetic experiences, and, as a result, they will hopefully be more open to such experiences and learn to better recognise them as such when they encounter them in the future. In fact, every person does experience art and beauty and nature to *some* degree at least (it is difficult to avoid – even if it is simply walking past a park or hearing music playing in the background), so to have an education that better supports them to engage in such a way with these objects so as to glean the aesthetic experience that is there for them to enjoy or participate in is crucial. This defends aesthetic education; of which arts making and creating is one aspect, and learning to engage with artworks is another, the latter of which includes a theoretical element alongside the practical skill of learning artistic techniques.

“Aesthetic Education,” then, is an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed, and to lend various works of art their lives in such a way that they can achieve them as variously meaningful. When this happens, new connections are made in experience: new patterns are formed, new vistas are opened. Persons *see* differently. (Greene, 2001, p. 6).

Life is impoverished to the degree that a person fails to gain *any* aesthetic experience. If one never enjoys some music, or a feeling of artistic movement, or design, the texture of an object, or singing a song, then this is an experience in the flourishing life that is unfortunately and regrettably closed off. Such enjoyment of aesthetic experiences ought to be an option available to those who wish to partake, and this option is made more readily available if the person is inducted into it. Of course people will likely stumble upon a feeling of awe, the

sublime, or being moved by the aesthetic features of an object, but it is more likely to be made present to them if they are taught it is an option and educated in an open, receptive attitude that affords them the understanding that art may be experienced in such a manner.⁸

Imagine Frank Jackson's (1986) Mary, who grew up in a black and white room but is a brilliant scientist who knows all there is to know about colour. When Mary finally leaves the black and white room, and sees the colour red for the first time, defenders of *qualia* claim she learns something new. Something she could only learn through experience. The experience of red is not something she can explain in a reductionist or propositional manner, but it is nevertheless some form of knowledge that is significant. Mary, prior to experiencing red, was missing out on something. Similarly, if Mary had never encountered art: experienced a beautiful melody, sung, danced, stared at an intriguing painting or paused to admire a sculpture, to that extent at least her life was lacking. Regardless of whether artworks offer us new knowledge that cannot be gleaned elsewhere,⁹ it offers us distinct experiences. The flourishing life includes these aesthetic experiences, and artworks play a vital role in connecting human beings to such aesthetic experiences.¹⁰

The flourishing life includes the arts: aesthetic engagement and appreciation if not art making as a manifestation of creative and imaginative engagement with the world. If education is to prepare students for a flourishing life, it must expose students to art making and appreciation and teach them how to *experience* art. This involves valuing art for its own sake: for the purpose for which it is created; namely, to evoke an aesthetic experience in the receiver of the artwork.

CONCLUSION

As I see it, the point of education is to support students to be in the best possible position to be able to live meaningful, autonomous lives, filled with rich experiences. The arts and aesthetic education are vital to such lives and to such experiences in the world. Everyone ought to have the opportunity to learn about art, to appreciate and to create art, to critique art and to understand its role in society, historically and theoretically. A life without art is impoverished. Yet such claims cannot simply be stated. The argument that aesthetic education is a compulsory component on the educational curriculum requires a defence that can be substantiated and justified. In this paper I have critiqued two arguments that seek to defend arts education on the basis of the role art has to play in supporting self-expression and moral formation. I do not deny that art may indeed support self-expression and/or the cultivation of a sympathetic attitude. I am sure that the arts may be used to do all sorts of other things as well. But it is the distinctive value of art objects that afford aesthetic experience that should be the basis upon which the arts are understood to contribute to the

flourishing life, and it is upon this foundation that an argument ought to be mounted as to why schooling needs the arts and all students deserve aesthetic education.

There is more work to be done in order to robustly justify and defend this claim. For now, it must be stated that an educational curriculum without compulsory aesthetic education and a proper valuing of the arts is negligent of our aim to cultivate flourishing human beings who deserve meaningful aesthetic experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

N/A

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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NOTES

- ¹ This is not to say that all art objects or objects that produce an aesthetic experience must be pleasant or beautiful.
- ² Note that for Collingwood, craft is not art proper precisely because it does not express a distinct or unique emotion. Similarly, mass artworks such as films are criticised by expressivists such as Dwight MacDonal as pseudo-art because they offer generic or 'canned' emotional experiences rather than unique, distinctive expressions such as that afforded by art proper: namely high art or avant-garde art (see Carroll, 1998). This is problematic if we consider that much of what students

may enjoy or find as a vehicle for self-expression includes pop music, street dance, film and television series.

- 3 For example, the UK government's 2019 *Changing Lives* report notes the decline in arts education in the UK, despite policies supporting the inclusion of the arts across primary and secondary curricula. The focus on mandatory numeracy and literacy testing (particularly the National Statutory Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) which commence in primary school), often sees a decline in time spent on the arts in favour of test revision. The Report concludes, 'We are deeply concerned by the evidence we received around the downgrading of arts subjects in schools, with all the consequent implications for children's development, wellbeing, experiences, careers and, ultimately, life chances'.
- 4 In fact, Reiss and White (2013, p. 17) claim that 'Pulp fiction, soap operas, and B movies are also about human life and relationships. Their authors and directors know all about getting an audience hooked. But we rightly do not rate them highly as educational vehicles. Indeed, we sometimes see them as anti-educational – if, for instance, they reinforce stereotypes, rather than challenge them'.
- 5 I would also call the argument Maxine Greene (2001) offers in favour of aesthetic education 'composite' due to the multiple, various lines of defence she draws upon to substantiate her case.
- 6 For instance, Reiss and White (2013) refer to personal qualities, whereas Brighouse *et al.* (2018) refer to personal autonomy and personal fulfillment. Note: allowing for individual differences does not undermine normativity.
- 7 Defending aesthetic experience as intrinsically valuable is difficult; such claims are often stated rather than explained. Frankena (1973, p. 87–88) details a comprehensive list of intrinsic goods that includes pleasures and satisfactions; happiness; beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated; aesthetic experience; and self-expression.
- 8 See D'Olimpio (2020) 'Education and the Arts: inspiring wonder', in ed. A. Schinkel, *Wonder, education and human flourishing*. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit University Press, pp. 256–270.
- 9 Hirst (1973) defends literature and the fine arts as offering a unique form of aesthetic knowledge. This argument is critiqued by Pring (1976) and Wilson (1979) and discussed in Hand (2006).
- 10 There is also a role for nature, yet this debate is for another paper.

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