

Of Art and Skill

by Brian Keeble

Plato, in stating in the *Gorgias* that he could not fairly give the name 'art' to anything irrational, was no more than restating a teaching of Pythagoras who is said to have taught that 'art' is a habit of co-operating with reason. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, extended the same line of thought in teaching that 'art' is a capacity to make, involving a true course of reason. This doctrine makes it clear that the creative principle that is art is a rational habit or disposition of the mind to pursue a true course of action in making something. Thus art stays inside the artist, being understood in terms of the imposition of form upon substance or matter—sound if he is composer, stone if a mason, and so on. But at a higher level it was understood as an analogue of a cosmic principle, whereby the *Logos*, the Divine Reason, manifests itself in the world of created things. The human artist, by imposing order and beauty upon substance, operates in imitation of how God creates the beauty and order of the world, of how He shapes the order of the Creation from the Divine Intellect according to the cosmic possibilities that properly belong to it and thereby perfect it.

The teaching that 'art' is intimately wedded to reason and rationality was propounded through the centuries in one formulation or another until the Scholastic masters of the Middle Ages. St Bonaventure's *Retracing the Arts to Theology* was perhaps the last extended treatise to expound the doctrine of art, or making according to skill, as a type of rational wisdom that imitates, ultimately a divine prototype. But that was then. We live now in different times. Few people today who think of themselves as artists would instinctively associate the practice of their

art as being due to a habit of reason that has a cosmic significance.

We can hardly doubt that art, in our time, is widely thought of as something added to life, an optional extra, a diversion practised by specialists whose products somehow transcend the more mundane requirements needed to sustain our material and economic existence. We are aware that, as if to counter this situation, it is often hinted (at least) that a degree of aesthetic gratification is a necessary part of maintaining our psychological health. This argument sometimes carries with it a tacit denial that such gratification was available to less sophisticated cultures than our own. And this despite the fact that our museums and cultural heritage sites present abundant evidence that culture, belief, vocation, livelihood, beauty and utility were for these cultures unified to a degree that for us is clearly impossible.

Progressively, since the Renaissance, and as a result of the catastrophic divorce of beauty and utility, art has been both understood and practised in terms of freely exercising a spirit of individual creativity. Indeed, we have perhaps pursued to its limit the idea that art is the expression of an autonomous principle of creativity owing little or nothing to the demands of reason and intelligibility. But this is all part and parcel of a trend in our time in which every idea seems destined to be tested to its limits—all too often with the intention of dismantling it. We have done this with the idea of art yet are reluctant to clear away the scattered remains of supposedly outmoded ideas. We go on with the practice of art assuming that a meaningful and coherent philosophy underwrites whatever is done in art's name. While at best we are in agreement that art is necessary and desirable, at worst much of what is currently presented as art, if our more *avant-garde* music concerts and art exhibitions are anything to go by, is little more than a pathology of irrational and abnormal behaviour. No doubt this state of affairs has come about under the suasion of a tyranny that urges innovation in defiance of all meaningful criteria.

We have allowed ourselves to become habituated to using the term 'artist' to denote one who creates works of art, but without giving much thought to what is intrinsic to the notion of artistry. Instead, we have drifted along with the vague assumption that the word 'artist' designates a person of exceptional, aesthetic sensibility; and that whatever someone who possesses such a sensibility conceives and executes must be

the thing we are obliged to call 'art'. But such an assumption will not stand up to scrutiny. Firstly, and most obviously, it makes it impossible to determine who, justifiably, can be said to possess the defining sensibility that is the mark of the artist in distinction from the broad range of people who are not thought to be artists but who none the less possess and exercise some measure of aesthetic sensibility in their work. Secondly, and interconnected with this shortcoming, the assumption does not allow for a definition of art itself as distinct from the outcome of any other act of making. These two primary weaknesses grow from the now ingrained acceptance of the idea of art as designating, exclusively, a category of external objects or productions having an aesthetic *raison d'être* of their own purely on account of the creator's special sensibility. In this view, quintessentially, art is something external to the artist, having been transferred to the object by an acquiescent consent that 'art is whatever creative artists' do. This further assumption gives rise to a widespread and pressing need to answer the question 'What is art?'—a question that so readily comes to the surface in almost any current discussion or appraisal of works of contemporary art. This need is felt alike by the expert no less than by the inexpert.

A change in the way in which we think about art would therefore be timely. To this end we could do no better than return to the traditional and universal understanding of art,¹ one that is more faithful to both the nature and function of art itself, as well as to the wider role it plays in the order and maintenance of civilized society. This would mean that whenever we think of art or refer to an artist we ought to make a mental note that the word 'artist' refers to one who is a skilled maker and that art itself is the perfection of work. Thus we would be reminded on each occasion of the primary meaning of the word 'art'.

Our word 'art' comes from the Latin *ars*, 'a fitting together'. *Ars* also designates 'skill' and 'craft'. Our word 'skill' has come down from the Middle English '*skille*', meaning 'discernment'/'judgement'. We would do well to remind ourselves also that such terms as 'artistry', 'work', 'craft', 'masterpiece', 'vocation' and 'talent' all inescapably imply the sense of a mastery of means applied to a given end: an appropriate and just

¹ See the author's *Every Man An Artist, Readings in the Traditional Philosophy of Art* (Indiana, 2005), which, with its Bibliography, might serve as an introduction to this wide-ranging subject.

application of a wisdom that is at once of the mind and of the body to a given, intelligible and practical end.

To the extent that there is any confusion as to what is meant by the word 'art', that confusion arises from the fact that our use of that term has, as it were, come adrift from its moorings in this primary sense of being the deployment of a faculty that is as much to do with how we think—how we apply the mind—as it has to do with what we apply it to. All too often the intrinsic, time-honoured resonances that are implicit in the notion of art as a skill in predisposing the mind to work fruitfully with reason, are absent from our understanding of what art is. This being so we might venture to recover some of these resonances by examining in more detail what is implicit in the notion of skill itself.

To speak of skill is to speak necessarily of something that is exercised in being applied to something other. Skill cannot be exercised in isolation from something that is thereby altered for the better by its application. The change made by the application of skill comes about in some mode or manner according to both the receptivity and resistance of the other. Skill can no more be exercised in the face of total resistance than it would be needed where its application could produce no effect or gain. Therefore, to speak of skill is to recognize a greater or lesser degree of mastery. Such mastery must be present in the one who exercises skill as well as evident in that to which skill has been applied. This in turn means that both that which applies (mental and bodily effort) and that which is applied (intelligible and practical command) face some inherent opposition in the circumstances that require the exercise of skill. In addition it must be recognized that mental irresolution, physical infirmity and intellectual confusion, as well as the frequent intractability of whatever skill is applied to, all contribute to the conditions under which skill is directed to overcome this opposition.

To be skilled is more and greater than to be unskilled in an order of values established by convention and precedent in any field of applied skill. It is naturally unjust to value and reward unskilled work over and above skilled work. This is due to our innate recognition that skill, in being applied, must in some measure envisage a given result that can-

not be achieved without the proper exercise of skill. It is not the moral worth of the desirable end that is in question here, for skill in itself is concerned only with the good of its exercise, not with the good of the end to which it is applied. A just valuation of skill is due because the exercise of skill facilitates the achievement of a given end, not the desirability of the end itself—the production of an efficient murder weapon, for instance. What would be the justice in rewarding what thwarts a given end over and above what facilitates it? This principle of just valuation is as true of the skill of the murderer and the maker of chairs as it is of the philosopher.

The implication of all this is that a degree of knowledge and discernment must be possessed by anyone who wishes to exercise skill and that that knowledge and discernment involve a fuller grasp of reality than would exist in their absence. It would be contrary to, and therefore a perversion of, the nature of intelligence to assign a greater significance and merit to the unskilful than to the skilful in achievements of a like nature.

The final goal of skill implies the perfect integration of conception and execution. This presupposes an effective correspondence between the state of mind of the worker and the circumstances that call for skill's application. These circumstances may themselves be of the mind (there is a skill in the proper application of intelligence), or of the handling of the things that make up the practical and material fabric of life. In both cases precedent and convention form the basis on which the exercise of skill proceeds, even though they are not the necessary criteria for artistic value. They are, however, necessarily the implicit condition for the exercise of skill. No one sets about applying skill at random with a completely blank mind and in a spirit of total innovation. The aptitude implied by skill presupposes an ability to envisage in the mind appropriate action and effective realization—*what* needs to be done and *how* it can be done. Both are largely cultural acquisitions shaped by past practice and experience. To want always to break with convention (that self-indulgent dream of the *avant-garde*) in the name of a creative spirit that believes that innovation has an absolute right to impose itself upon the making of anything, is to pursue the chimera of a freedom that is quite literally without meaning. It is akin to believing that to give free rein to a spirit of mischief in changing the shapes of the letters of the

alphabet *at will* would increase the expressive powers of language. This in turn would be to pretend that we are obliged continually to invent reality rather than, as our possession of intelligence discovers, reality is that to which we must continually align our experience. It is here, in the complex interweaving of convention, precedent, memory and imagination, and much else that is necessary to the practice of any art, that we most clearly witness the impoverishment brought about by allowing the idea that the artist is a skilled maker to be eclipsed by the assumption that he or she is a purveyor of aesthetic sensation and idiosyncratic production.

The fact that skill, as a practical wisdom, necessarily depends upon memory and imagination and therefore upon precedent and convention indicates that skill cannot be meaningful independently of a set of values and criteria that make possible agreement as to the merit and relevance of its exercise. That is to say, for skill to be effective there must be a measure of consensus as to the appropriate occasion and conditions for its application. And since skill is something applied to something other than itself the merit of its application cannot inhere in skill itself. To exercise skill for its own sake is to make of means and ends one and the same thing. But, properly, the end of skill is determined by the values and criteria that themselves determine the merit of its application. Without these values and criteria there can be no assessment of skill since, in the absence of any distinction between means and ends, there is no way to judge how means have served ends. All of which is to say that the exercise of skill implicitly recognizes a standard against which its application is necessarily evaluated, a standard that is independent of the contingencies that warrant its application.

If the artist, as skilled workman, is not in possession of an appropriate skill, the result is noted as a deficiency. By definition a recognized failure to achieve a result cannot be accounted as greater or more complete than the result itself. Moreover, recognition of deficiency to achieve an end indicates that a desirable outcome must in some sense be discernible. It implies an evaluation against which the deficiency is proved. This evaluation is the measure of the ratio of intention to result. Without it there can be no recognition of the extent to which skilled application has fallen short of an intention to achieve an end result. Without such

an evaluation can any artistic judgement be possible?²

The standard by which skill is judged must be held in common by both the maker and the informed patron. (There are many occasions when they will be one and same.) If it is the skill of the maker to operate effectively towards a given end, then it is the skill of the patron to be able to appraise the outcome of the operation—the effectiveness of the means to achieve a given end. The common end of a skilled operation and a desirable result would not be realizable were the value of skill not present in its application. To deploy skill without any conception of a desirable result would be to assume the autonomous value of each and every exercise of skill, as if there could be no comparison of one skilled application from another in circumstances of a like nature. But this is not how we experience the result of skill, where it is clear that some assessment as between one application and another arises naturally from the conditions of the application itself.

The values and criteria by which a legitimate end may be determined cannot include the arbitrary and the unintelligible. How could skill, by its very nature meant to effect a change towards improvement, be deployed towards that which by definition cannot be foreseen or towards that which is incapable of being understood? This would by no means bar the ‘happy accident’, even if it must be recognized that in so far as the exercise of skill is an acquired faculty, we would not undertake to perfect a faculty in the absence of any understanding of its possible outcome? This is tantamount to recognizing at a human level a truth that is equally applicable at a cosmic level whereby, as Plato in the *Timaeas* states, ‘everything that becomes or is created must of necessity be created by some cause, for without a cause nothing can be created’. In relation to skill, what constitutes a cause is a desirable end, and this is by no means limited to the production of a physical object or action. Human needs embrace the mind no less than the body. The skilled formulation of a metaphysical or religious truth is as necessary as is the production of the objects that facilitate daily life: ‘And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship... And in the hearts of all that are

² See A. K. Coomaraswamy’s ‘Intention’ in *Selected Papers 1, Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey (Princeton University Press, 1977, pp. 266–75).

wise hearted I have put wisdom, that they make all that I have commanded thee.' (*Exodus* 31:3, 6)

We live in a time when the nature and merit of art has never before received so much scrutiny. This in turn generates an unprecedented quantity of evaluation and judgement as to the merit and/or greatness (or otherwise) of art and artists. But in the context of a more or less unrestrained freedom of personal creativity being accepted as the ultimate *raison d'être* for the practice of art, no standard (other than a consensus of opinion), nothing outside the act of making itself, permits the distinction of means from ends that must be the foundation of evaluation. For evaluation implies the presence or absence of accomplishment, else what is judgement for? Is there not obviously a qualitative difference between the exercise of skill and random activity? No supposed artistic judgement pretends to make a valuation on the basis of effort alone. This would be to evaluate behaviour rather than accomplishment. What draws us to a work of art (accomplishment) is not, or should not, be the personality of the artist, but the work's achievement in the context of conventions and precedents already established. There is no shortage of evidence to demonstrate that the tyranny of innovation that is part and parcel of the supposed legitimacy of the spirit of creative freedom of our time has replaced the idea that rational habits of mind are the necessary predisposition for the practice of any work of skill. (To the extent that, for instance, it is now possible for so-called 'conceptual artists' to exhibit work under their own name they have not themselves executed.) This change in the way we think about art could have come about only by ignoring the fact that established conventions and precedents must be the implied cause of any attempt to break from or replace them. The creative strategy of an '*avant-garde*' amounts to moving continuously forward into a judgemental vacuum where criteria and values can have no applicability. In effect it is an attempt to repeatedly wipe clean the slate of past experience and wisdom—never to let it accumulate.

No real and effective assessment of the merit of a work of skilled making can be undertaken where the end to which the means of skill is applied is not in some sense disclosed by the work itself. This fact is

fundamental to any understanding of what has been lost by art when it is practised in isolation from the normal context of the work and skill that supplies the needs of livelihood. And it is at the very heart of the problem we allude to whenever we ask of a work of art we do not recognize as such, 'What is it?' We all know what a cup, or a chair, or an icon, or a cathedral is and are able to *recognize* the value of their kind. In the sphere of the arts this act of cognition requires a generic identity to it to be meaningful. Without this identity we cannot know *what* is intended and all grounds for critical evaluation are thereby undermined. If 'creative activity' is exercised without the objectivity generic identity provides, then it is difficult to see how any accomplishment can be measured. What are we to make, for instance, of a room where, simply, the light goes on and off, exhibited as a work of art? Any real and effective standard of accomplishment must in some measure be in conformity with past experience. This is no more than a recognition that each thing made by true art has a generic reality. It is this generic reality that is disclosed by the work of skill itself. No work of skill is undertaken without some knowledge of this generic reality, just as no art, whether it be that of farming, motherhood, the sculpting of statues, or the making of poems, is practised on the supposition that the result is never seen, used or appreciated by someone other than the artist.

In reminding ourselves, then, of the tradition of thinking of art as a skilled making, 'involving a true course of reason', we note that it is not specifically the task of the maker to determine the appropriateness or otherwise of the circumstances that call for the production of a work of art, any more than it is his task alone to judge finally the suitability of the result. The appeal, however, to an unqualified and self-governing spirit of 'creative freedom' cannot help but pretend that this is the case in the way that it obscures the distinction of means from ends. It is certainly unwise for man to be without all sense of responsibility for the results of his actions in any sphere. But in matters that concern the artist's responsibility for the outcome of his art this clearly requires a legitimate objectivity in the deployment of means to achieve a given end. An objectivity that must by its very nature rest upon an adequate distinction of means from ends.

To suppose that art is the product of 'creative freedom' subjectivizes the whole complex process whereby a work of art comes into being,

is comprehended and valued. It does so by tacitly claiming that it is the inalienable right of the artist to set the terms of the wisdom and discernment that both the practice and understanding of art (skill) demand. But the complexity of this demand cannot do otherwise than accumulate deposits in convention and precedent the disowning of which, in the name of innovation, is made in the face of the obvious truth that art (skill) is the means to effect an end that cannot be art itself.

Such confusions are at the heart of the current trend whereby artistic assessment and judgement seem to be largely in abeyance. Everything, it seems, has become grist to the mill of the 'creative freedom' of the much vaunted contemporary artist for whom 'anything goes'. Nothing can fail or be judged to be inadequate in such circumstances. This, in reality, is a state of self-imposed intellectual neutrality in which it is impossible to objectively establish the need, intelligibility and valuation of the work in question. If the purpose of art is simply to exercise a certain creative freedom (in effect a licence to indulge private feelings), then that exercise itself becomes both the means and the end of the experience that is 'art'. In which case how can what that exercise produces be justifiably offered for objective appraisal? Surely the 'freedom' of such an exercise would be its own reward.

Nothing that has been said above should be interpreted as arguing that the exercise of skill is sufficient of itself to produce works of artistic quality. The doctrine of art as a discernment that remains in the artist certainly argues that skill is a necessary cause of works of art. It does not argue that it is the sufficient cause. In so far as the doctrine may act as a guide to the wisdom or otherwise of man's making and doing it is meant to guard against the inevitable productive and aesthetic impulses of man being given free rein in isolation from the practical condition of his environment on the one hand, and to disclose the integral requirements of his spiritual constitution on the other. For these are the polar axes between which the human state functions normally. In this disclosure the doctrine of art as a pre-formal habit of reason undoubtedly implies that the production of works of art without skill is impossible. It says nothing about skill being an arbiter of taste. Who cannot call to mind

many examples of art that exhibit a high degree of applied skill yet are none the less repellent or perverse? In such cases it is more a question of over-playing the expressive means beyond what is sufficient for the formal demands of the matter in question. Bad taste has to do with the artist not treating the substance he works with, with the integral truth due to its qualitative properties: objectively, an abuse of the material substance or subjectively, a perversion of the normal requirements of intelligence or aesthetic sensibility—thus the sculptor who strives to make stone simulate as near as possible the sensuous quality of flesh, or the poet who plays upon base sentimentalities to secure the reader's sympathy. Certainly skill is a dimension of the beauty of art since skill is needed to bring to a work of art its formal perfection, which must include the sense of its being fitted exactly to good and appropriate need and use. Excessive skill becomes bad taste precisely when it gives evidence of an element of deception—as we see, albeit distantly, in the word 'crafty'.

Nothing in the doctrine of art as skill forbids or excludes the possibility, the desirability, even the necessity of innovation. It certainly denies that innovation is itself the purpose and justification for art. It does so in the context of an understanding that sees innovation as naturally arising out of any particular need to guide the application of skill towards the realization of an idea. But innovation in this case would have no licence to do more than what is required to realize the perfection of the idea in question. This integral perfection is not only what is compromised whenever innovation is pursued for its own sake; it is also at the vacuity at the heart of the pursuit of 'creative freedom'.

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