

Λήμμα Σίλλερ από την Εγκυκλοπαίδεια Φιλοσοφίας του Στάφορντ: Κεφάλαιο 2.4

2.4. Letters on Aesthetic Education

Schiller's "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man" ["Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen," often referred to simply as "Aesthetic Letters"] is perhaps his best-known theoretical work. Published in his journal *Horen* in 1795 and written in the form of letters to his new patron, the Prince of Schleswig-Holstein-Augustenburg, they are dauntingly ambitious, encompassing a diagnosis of the French Revolution, a critique of the Enlightenment, a transcendental account of beauty, an analysis of human psychology, an assessment of art's psychological and political importance, and an image of a new, ideal form of government designed to allow humans to reach their full potential.

The "Aesthetic Letters" begin with an almost despondent analysis of the modern human condition.[6] The state is tottering, its "rotting foundations giving way". Hopes for freedom and progress prove to be vain in the face of "crude, lawless instincts" among some citizens and a "repugnant spectacle of lethargy" among others (NA XX, 96/E 96). Schiller lauds the Greeks for their simple, harmonious relation to their world and laments modern society's enslavement to its manufactured needs. Recent history had shown with painful clarity that if the moral character of the people is not developed, even the most idealistic revolution will fail. A vicious cycle suggests that without the state there can be no morality and without morality there can be no state. Despite the Enlightenment's lofty goals, Schiller laments, we see the spirit of the age wavering between perversity and brutality, between unnaturalness and mere nature, between superstition and moral unbelief; and it is only through an equilibrium of evils that it is still sometimes kept within bounds. (NA XX, 320–21/E 97)

The "moral possibility", Schiller simply concludes, "is lacking".

Among the culprits to be blamed for this condition are the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on reason and its eschewing of sentiment—factors that Schiller suggests led to the French Revolution's barbaric excesses. "The development of man's capacity for feeling", Schiller concludes, "is, therefore, the more urgent need of our age" (NA XX, 332/E 107). What more specifically is needed is an instrument that can develop this capacity for feeling without neglecting humans' rational capacities. In Letter Nine he offers his solution: "This instrument is fine art" (NA XX, 333/E 108). The artist, then, is called upon to influence the world for the good, resisting the distractions of the present in the interest of humanity itself. Schiller exhorts his fellow artists to surround their contemporaries with the great and noble forms of genius, and encompass them about with the symbols of perfection, until semblance conquer reality, and art triumph over nature. (NA XX, 336/E 111)

At this point, however, Schiller admits a problem: historically speaking, art has often had a corrupting effect. Perhaps we should resist being "delivered up to her enervating influence" (NA XX, 340/E 114). Before we draw this conclusion and abandon art as a solution to the

modern world's ills, however, we must assess what definition of art we are using to evaluate its failures. But against what are we to assess historical definitions of art? Such an inquiry would seem to presuppose a concept of beauty; if that concept itself comes from historical examples, the question of how to evaluate art objectively remains unresolved. An adequate analysis of art's potential, then, would seem to require an ahistorical definition of beauty. Again channeling Kant's transcendental method, Schiller then suggests that "perhaps experience is not the judgment seat before which such an issue can be decided" (NA XX, 340/E 114). Instead, any definition of beauty would "have to be deduced from the sheer potentialities of our sensuo-rational nature" (NA XX, 340/E 115); the pursuit of beauty requires a "pure concept of human nature as such". Since this concept in turn cannot be derived from experience, we must follow "the transcendental way" to truth (NA XX, 341/E 115).

Schiller thus begins, in Letter 11, with an examination of human nature. At the highest level of abstraction, he suggests, we find in humans a distinction between the person and his condition or "the self and its determining attributes" (NA XX, 341/E 115). The self Schiller associates with autonomous personhood, independence, and form; our condition he associates with embodiment, dependence, and matter. These two fundamentally opposed sides do, however, coexist in humans, resulting in the imperative that they be brought into harmony: each person is to "externalize all that is within him and give form to all that is outside him" (NA XX, 344/E 118).

In Letter 12, Schiller claims that humans are impelled towards the fulfillment of this imperative by two corresponding drives, the form drive [Formtrieb] and the sense drive [Sachtrieb].^[7] The sense drive "proceeds from the physical existence of man" (NA XX, 344/E 118). It situates the human within time and so within change: man in this state is nothing but a unit of quantity, an occupied moment of time—or rather, he is not at all, for his personality is suspended as long as he is ruled by sensation. (NA XX, 345/E 119)

The form drive by contrast affirms the person as constant throughout change; it annuls time and annuls change. It wants the real to be necessary and eternal, and the eternal and the necessary to be real. In other words, it insists on truth and on the right. (NA XX, 346/E 120)

In action, the form drive is concerned with dignity; the sense drive is concerned with self-preservation. In politics, the form drive results in abstract principles; the sense drive results in lawlessness.

In Letter 14, Schiller suggests that when a human experiences both these drives in balance—when he is "at once conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence" and can "feel himself matter and come to know himself as mind"—a new drive is awakened, namely the play drive [Spieltrieb] (NA XX, 353/E 126). In the play drive, both other drives "work in concert": they are "directed toward annulling time within time, reconciling becoming with absolute being and change with identity" (NA XX, 353/E 126). In holding the first two drives in harmony, the play drive frees humans of the domination of each:

To the extent that it deprives feelings and passions of their dynamic power, it will bring them into harmony with the ideas of reason; and to the extent that it deprives the laws of reason

of their moral compulsion, it will reconcile them with the interests of the senses. (NA XX, 352/E 127)

If this can be achieved, the human will be given “an intuition of his human nature, and the object that afforded him this vision would become for him a symbol of his accomplished destiny” (NA XX, 353/E 126).

What, then, can awaken the play drive? In Letter 15, Schiller suggests that each drive also has an object. The object of the sense drive is life; the object of the form drive is form. Because the play drive allows these drives to act in concert, its object is living form [lebende Gestalt] (NA XX, 355/E 128). Living form, in turn, is nothing less than beauty. Beautiful objects, then, can put humans in the state in which we realize our highest potential. When, to use Schiller’s example, we contemplate the Juno Ludovisi, we feel our sense drive and our form drive perfectly equalized. In such a moment, “we find ourselves at one and the same time in a state of utter repose and extreme agitation” (NA XX, 360/E 132).

Since the contemplation of beauty leaves us dominated neither by the sense drive nor by the form drive, the play drive “gives rise to freedom” (NA XX, 373/E 143); it allows the will, which exists independently of both drives, to choose between them (NA XX, 371/E 142). This freedom does not correlate to our ability to articulate and follow the moral law. Freedom is rather the ability to survey both this law and our sensuous desires and choose between them. In facilitating this ability and so enabling freedom, the contemplation of beauty completes the concept of human nature (NA XX, 355/E 128). So as soon as reason “utters the pronouncement: let humanity exist, it has by that very pronouncement also promulgated the law: let there be beauty” (NA XX, 356/E 129). Play, Schiller then reiterates, allows humans to fulfill their very natures: “man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” (NA XX, 359/E 131).

Beauty’s ability to free our minds of determinations explains an apparent paradox. On the one hand, beauty does not produce knowledge or build character (NA XX, 377/E 147). But on the other hand, precisely because beauty accomplishes nothing, “something is achieved”; when our drives are brought into harmony, our will can actually choose freely. So defined, the aesthetic state is “the most fruitful of all in respect of knowledge and morality”; by committing neither to form nor to matter, it contains maximum potential for both (NA XX, 379/E 148). “This lofty equanimity and freedom of the spirit, combined with power and vigor”, Schiller says, “is the mood in which a genuine work of art should release us”; after witnessing such art, we “shall with equal ease turn to seriousness or to play, to repose or to movement, to compliance or to resistance” (NA XX, 380/E 149). In facilitating this condition, beauty gives us the “gift of humanity itself”, Schiller says; it is our “second creatress” (NA XX, 378/E 147–8). Our status as finite creatures means that this state will remain only an ideal that each particular art—music, painting, sculpture, etc.—must struggle to approach in its own way (NA XX, 380–1/E 149–50). But all genuine art will produce a state of equilibrium that puts the will in a position of maximum power and self-determination (Beiser 2005: 155).

The kind of experiences required for each human to reach the aesthetic condition will vary. To address this fact, Schiller postulates a dichotomy within beauty itself. Energizing beauty, he says, tenses us: it braces our nature and encourages prompt reaction. Such beauty is necessary for the “sensuous man” who feels too much and can be brought to equilibrium by exposure to form or thought. Melting beauty, by contrast, releases: it relaxes our natures and is especially necessary for the “spiritual man” who thinks too much and needs to be brought to beauty by his senses. Both kinds of beauty can be dangerous: energizing beauty can become extravagance, and melting beauty can result in stifled energy or emptiness (NA XX, 360–2/E 133–4). But when they combine to produce a harmony that cancels their respective extremes, they can allow individual humans to reach their highest potential.

Building on these distinctions, Schiller claims in Letter 24 that both individual humans and humanity in general must follow three developmental stages: physical, aesthetic, and moral (NA XX, 388/E 156). In their initial natural state, humans are ruled by nature. When reason begins to stir, “man leaves the narrow confines of the present in which mere animality stays bound, in order to strive towards an unlimited future” (NA XX, 390/E 159). But because reason seems entirely opposed to natural life, its unconditional laws are experienced as only coercive: humans then either resist reason’s law, resorting to eudaemonism, or enslave themselves to it, denying their sensuous natures entirely (NA XX, 390–1/E 158–9). Beauty, by contrast, can unite humans’ natural and rational sides; it can facilitate our entry into the “world of ideas” but without leaving behind “the world of sense” (NA XX, 396/E 163). It can, then, convince us that the moral law is not a foreign imposition and allow us to live in harmony with its dictates.

In Letters 26 and 27, Schiller imagines the circumstances that must have been necessary for early humans to develop an aesthetic sense. Traces of play can be found in nature whenever there is an abundance of resources: lions play when they have excess energy and are not under threat; plants send out more shoots than necessary when they are adequately nourished, squandering energy “in a movement of carefree joy” (NA XX, 406/E 173). Similar abundance among humans inspires “indifference to reality and interest in semblance [Schein]”: interest, that is, in a new layer of meaning and significance that humans recognize as their own creation. Semblance is positioned between “stupidity” and truth, both of which “seek only the real” (NA XX, 399/E 165). A nature that delights in semblance, by contrast, is “no longer taking pleasure in what it receives, but in what it does” (NA XX, 399/E 167; Sharpe 2005: 161–2). Semblance is evident in adorned weapons, the transition of movement into dance, and the evolution of desire into love. When we find such “traces of a disinterested and unconditional appreciation of pure semblance”, the people in question have “started to become truly human” (NA XX, 405/E 171–2).

In a final set of distinctions, Schiller somewhat suddenly applies his tripartite analysis to political states. In the “dynamic state of rights”, humans limit each other’s behavior through force. In the “ethical state”, humans curb their desires out of respect for an abstract moral law. The third option Schiller calls “the aesthetic state”, which, he claims, has the highest potential since it “consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual” (NA XX, 410/E 176). In the aesthetic state, citizens do their duty out of inclination, encourage the balancing of their fellow citizens’ rational and sensual capacities, and act as unified,

harmonious human beings (Beiser 2005: 163; Dahlstrom 2008: 101–2). In such a state, no privilege or autocracy can be tolerated. Schiller admits in the last paragraph that “such a state of aesthetic semblance” is rare but exists in “a few chosen circles” in which humans are governed by their aesthetic nature and so exist in freedom and cooperation with others (NA XX, 412/E 178).

The ending to the Letters has left many readers confused and dissatisfied, as evidenced by its mostly unfavorable reception among Schiller’s contemporaries (Wilkinson and Willoughby cxxxiii ff). Schiller seems to be unclear regarding whether the aesthetic state is the means to the achievement of full humanity or whether it is an end; he seems, in short, not to have answered one of his original questions, namely which must come first, a good state or good citizens (Roehr 2003: 133–4; Sharpe 2005: 160). Schiller has also been accused of encouraging elitism and a retreat into apoliticism through his image of an aesthetic state, a charge most powerfully leveled in the next century by Marxist critics (Sharpe 1995: 91). Others by contrast see the Letters as a testament to Schiller’s political engagement and republicanism (Beiser 2005: 123 ff; López 2011; Moggach 2008; Schmidt 2009). There is, in any case, no doubt that the Aesthetic Letters were enormously influential. The concept of play has been taken up and developed by philosophers such as Charles Sanders Peirce and Hans-Georg Gadamer (Wilkinson and Willoughby 1967: clxxxviii–ix; Gadamer 1975: 101–34). The idea of play specifically as a cure for alienation influenced the Frankfurt School through the writings of Herbert Marcuse: indeed, according to Terry Eagleton, “[t]he whole radical aesthetic tradition from Coleridge to Herbert Marcuse ... draws sustenance from [Schiller’s] prophetic denunciation” of the modern condition (1990: 118; Marcuse 1955: 185–196; Guyer 2008; Sharpe 1991: 90–92; Saranpa 2002: 70–8). Jürgen Habermas found in Schiller’s idea of an aesthetic state a vision of a “communicative, community-building, solidarity-giving force of art” (1985: 59–64), in which art is capable of “revolutionizing the conditions of mutual understanding” (1985: 46, 49): a vision that, however problematic, he sees as a source of insight into the nature of modern politics.