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CHAPTER

9 Art and Ethics: Formalism

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Abstract

This chapter presents the formalist account of the moral status of an artwork as an aesthetically significant and autonomous form, with due emphasis on the Anglo-American art-for-art's-sake aesthetic, as it developed between 1870 and 1960. The author shows that the formalist art-is-above-morals approach is a substantive moral stance in itself. Formalist aesthetics is usually presented in the literature as evincing a purist indifference to ethics, construing moral properties as external to art, in opposition to the internal pure properties of art's composition. The chapter demonstrates that this is a misrepresentation of the complex formalist prescriptive idea of the relations between art and ethics. Through its autonomy and imperviousness to external co-opting—which is accomplished by due focus on aesthetic form—art on the formalist account is held to be a paradigm of the liberalist principles of individual freedom and self-fulfillment, thus an inherent means to the good.

Keywords: [formalism](#), [aestheticism](#), [liberalism](#), [form](#), [Oscar Wilde](#), [Walter Pater](#), [Clive Bell](#), [Roger Fry](#), [Clement Greenberg](#)

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The contemporary predominantly visual age grants aesthetic formalism a new role in philosophical analysis. According to the visual turn in aesthetics, philosophical attention ought to focus on the visual sphere as the correct context for addressing the concepts of human nature, culture, and ontology. Sensuous forms and captivating constructions abound in modern life. Observe, for instance, the excessive use of screens and media nets, the ubiquitous image-making use of mobile phones, the spread of emoji-based communication, and the aggressive exploitation of the public sphere by vested industries.¹ Seemingly, it is in terms of these sensuous forms and constructs, rather than internal conceptual contents, that our ontology and perception is constructed. Consequently, vital questions about the ethical commitments of the visual disciplines, to which art is unique and central, arise with pressing force. To this end, I consider *formalism* as the main theory of art to emphasize the power of art's form, composition, and appearance, and

to demand that art's forms should enjoy creative autonomy and institutional freedom. It is thus imperative to revisit the formalist view of the ethical status of art, aptly captured in the famous slogan that "art is above morals" (Bell 1958, 24).

p. 124 "Aesthetic formalism" refers both to an abstract characterization of art (and adjacent aesthetic realms) and a prominent Anglo-American school in the modernist philosophy of art. In various forms, aesthetic formalism operated from the closing decades of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, growing concomitantly with the development of formalist art, curation of exhibitions, and art criticism. The present contribution thus addresses the formalist definition of art, in conjunction with a historicist account of the ethical status of art arising from the formalist movement. Formalism in aesthetics is often presented in the literature as a movement devoid of ethical content and theoretically indifferent to ethical questions; in other words, as a nonmoral theory of art. Nevertheless, not only did formalism thoroughly address the relations between art and ethics, and art and life (against the relations between ethics and the extra-artistic visual realm), but it also defined art as an ethical model of life. I therefore argue that aesthetic formalism is *not* indifferent to ethics but, on the contrary, forms a cogent ethical stance, which is dialectical yet orderly, along the lines of modernist social liberalism. It is true that the formalist liberalist thought of the nineteenth century moved in the twentieth century toward a "revolt against formalism," as claimed in 1957 by the pragmatist philosopher and historian of ideas Morton White (White 1957). Nevertheless, throughout modernism, art was granted an exceptional status, and aesthetics did not entail that liberalist ethics and formalism were mutually exclusive. On the contrary, aesthetic formalism was committed to the paramount natural right defended by liberalism, namely individual freedom and fulfillment.

The aesthetic moralism of the nineteenth century, which grew alongside formalism, emphasized art's didactic message in order to advance a moral conception of actual action, "to forward the right action," as highlighted by the formalist critique (Fry 1920, 14). At the same time, formalists rejected the use of artistic forms in spheres extraneous to art. For example, John Ruskin's influential Victorian moralism endorsed the use of the "moral part of imagination" in art, claiming in *Modern Painters* that "perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection" (Ruskin 2018, 62). Similarly, Leo Tolstoy's socialist version of moralism enlisted the content or art to the moral progress of the community to produce a model fit for evaluative purposes: "The evolution of feelings takes place by means of art, replacing lower feelings, less kind and less needed for the good of humanity, by kinder feelings, more needed for that good. This is the purpose of art. And therefore art is better in its content in so far as it fulfills this purpose better, and is worse in so far as it fulfills it less" (Tolstoy 1995, 143). In their writings, the contemporary nineteenth-century formalists explicitly addressed Ruskin's and Tolstoy's approaches to art, arguing that the captivating power of art ought to be expended on the production of new ontological spheres, allowing art's forms to remain free from political or social message, and to become a model for freedom and self-fulfillment (Gal, 2015, Ch. 2). These formalist proposals formed an alternative to what the aestheticist-formalists Oscar Wilde and Roger Fry respectively called "poor, probable, uninteresting human life" (Wilde 2013, 1515) and "actual life" (Fry 1920, 12). In short, life is inferior to art, according to formalism. While Wilde argues that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (Wilde 2013, 1516), Fry offers an imperative regarding imaginative life, "the expression and a stimulus" of which is art: "We should rather justify actual life by its relation to the imaginative...since the imaginative life comes in the course of time to represent more or less what mankind feels to be the completest expression of its own nature, the freest use of its innate capacities, the actual life may be explained and justified in its approximation that freer and fuller life" (Wilde 2013, 1259–1260; Fry 1920, 14–15). Formalism thus sees art as dwelling in the depths of our nature and argues that the flourishing human being is an aestheticist at heart. It is through art that we may reach "freer and fuller life," at once the constitutive principle and mainstay of modern liberalism.

p. 125 The significant moral status of art as a model, according to aesthetic formalism, becomes clearer if we bring out what I see as its four main propositions, to be elaborated in the subsequent discussion:

- a. Art's moral status is "internal"; that is, art has an independent value and is self-justified.
- b. Art is committed to its medium and internal normativity—named, for example, "the spirit of the picture" by Henri Matisse, or art's "own special responsibilities to its material" by Walter Pater—rather than to extra-artistic goals.
- c. The foregoing does not render art nonmoral or detached from life. Rather, owing to its internal normativity, art serves as a model for individual freedom, autonomy and aspiration to self-fulfillment and the ideal.
- d. Thanks to its internal normativity, art is able to create ontological possibilities through free forms, enabling the viewer to access spheres beyond the familiar.

The Proper Area of Art

General philosophical formalism holds that the identity of a thing is determined by its form, a prototypical form when referring to groups, and that knowing a thing involves an acquaintance with its form. In the case of systems or languages, such as logic, mathematics, or law, formalism abstracts normativity and standards of judgment from the internal or syntactic, often rule-bound, set of relations between the elements of the system. Aesthetic formalism is closely related to the ontological, epistemological, and syntactic aspects of general formalism. It focuses on *aesthetic form*, namely, a composition organized around aesthetic principles. Aesthetic form is considered the essence of an artwork and the foundation of artistic experience and judgment. The formalist idea regarding art was expressed as early as the eighteenth century by Immanuel Kant, and again in the mid-nineteenth century by Eduard Hanslick in "The Beautiful in Music."² As a distinct modernist movement, formalism was inaugurated in Europe of the late nineteenth century by the aestheticist anti-moralist and partly anti-Victorian Walter Pater and his student Wilde, who championed aestheticist art and the budding of abstraction in art (as exemplified, for example, by James Whistler). It progressed in the early twentieth century mainly through the efforts of A. C. Bradley and members of the Bloomsbury group such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry, who dedicated themselves to defending post-Impressionist art. In the American mid-twentieth century, it gained adherence from Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, who supported Abstract-Expressionist art. The formalist movement ended with the anti-formalist linguistic turn in aesthetics, and the emergence of Pop Art and Conceptual Art. Yet formalism remains an influential and much discussed school of thought. As a general theory of art, formalism is a prominent force in areas pertaining to design and the aesthetics of the everyday world.

For aesthetic formalism, as proper to other kinds of formalism also, the subject of judgment is not the correspondence between system and life or external reality, but rather the consecutive or mutual relations between artworks, styles, or methods within the larger frame of art. Thus, formalism demarcates the limits of art as independent from society, culture, or ethics. The characterization of the ambit of art as internal to the sphere of art is proposed by Wilde in his aestheticist and early formalist "The Critic as Artist" from 1891:

I would call criticism a creation within a creation. For just as the great artists, from Homer and Aeschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added.

(Wilde 2013, 1317)

According to the formalist theory of art-criticism sketched by Wilde in this brilliant essay, the critic's task is not to extract a message from an artwork, reapplying it to life, but to advance beyond the ordinary reaches of life using the artwork's forms to create new ones.³ It is evident that Wilde's proposition is normative, implying that the power of art does not emerge from correspondence to a notion of life or reality extraneous to life. Indeed, a salient feature of aesthetic formalism is its normative character and emphasis on the power of aesthetic form. The power of aesthetic form is the foundation of the relation between art and ethics: if genuinely free, it may inspire us to achieve freedom and self-fulfillment, but it may also draw responses of wanting to co-opt or defuse its forms.

The celebrated formalist label of aesthetic form, "significant form," was coined in 1909 by Bradley in "Poetry for Poetry's Sake." Drawing upon the aestheticist imperative "art for art's sake," which enjoins art to free itself through composition from external justification, moral obligation and moral ends, Bradley defined "mere form in poetry" as possessing intrinsic value, freed from "ulterior ends" (Bradley 1965, 16). In realizing that mere form is rare in poetry, he follows Pater, the founder of aestheticism ("an authority whom the formalist will not despise") as he develops his proposal (Bradley 1965, 16). Like Pater, Bradley claims that free poetry is an art form whose *telos* is internal, and its structure immune to recruitment for external purposes, because its content and form are absolutely united by an expressive style: namely, by an aesthetically significant form. Bradley elaborated the aestheticist-formalist anti-mimesis theory that Wilde presented in his 1891 "The Decay of Lying." These ideas are centered on the notion of ontological independence from reality and its imitation, and the artificial creation of a novel and superior alternative sphere. Aestheticism and Formalism argue that the visual and artistic composition of the arts comprehensively contain all that there is in it—a crucial condition for art's autonomy.⁴ For Bradley, too, the aim of poetry is to stay clear of adventitious goals, or goals extrinsic to art, which is a necessary condition for grasping art's ontological structure and underpins our ability to judge art's real value. Moreover, the need to respect the autonomy of poetry is related to resisting the impositions of ordinary existence, and applies to both artist and reader:

The consideration of ulterior ends, whether by the poet in the act of composing or by the reader in the act of experiencing, tends to lower poetic value. It does so because it tends to change the nature of poetry by taking it out of its own atmosphere. For its nature is to be not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world, conform to its laws, and ignore for the time the beliefs, aims, and particular conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality.

(Bradley 1965, 7)

The term "significant form" was transferred from poetry to visual arts by Bell in his 1913 book *Art*, which became a canonical formalist text. "Lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant Form'; and 'Significant Form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art" (Bell 1958, 17). Thus, Bell claims, significant form is the essential quality that constitutes the group of visual art and design works, comprising elements as diverse as the mosque of Hagia Sophia, the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes, the paintings of Poussin, Piero Della Francesca, or Paul Cézanne. All these possess "moving arrangements and combinations": a significant form, which according to formalism, is internally related to ethical character. When the organizing principle is the aesthetic rightness of the interrelations between its elements, the artwork's commitment is internal, or better yet, it is a commitment to the autonomy of its medium. It exempts the artwork from external moral commitments, but at the same time, it, the formalists believe, a

point overlooked by many, construes art as a model of internal normative consistency, self-fulfillment, autonomy, and freedom—one's being for one's sake.

However, that is not to say that according to the formalist view of art, an exemption from external moral commitment entails a vacuous moral status. Rather, for the formalist, it is the very character of art that attributes to it ethical status and significance. By contrast, moralism in art deprives art of its unique ethical status. Bell's formulation, stressing the difference between moralism and autonomy of art with respect to the creation of positive ethical value, is clear on this score:

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Art is above morals, or, rather, all art is moral because, as I hope to show presently, works of art are immediate means to good. Once we have judged a thing a work of art, we have judged it ethically of the first importance and put it beyond the reach of the moralist.

(Bell 1958, 24)

Bell's comments reveal that behind formalism's apparently purist lack of substance lies a deep understanding of human nature and a commensurate commitment to ethical flourishing. Insofar as it is a modernist movement, aesthetic formalism, from its aestheticist beginnings in the 1870s up to its final reverberations on the 1960s American art scene, was committed to the natural right of personal freedom, and to humanism and democracy. Certainly, the ethical stance of formalism is complex and sometimes needs refinement and elaboration. Nevertheless, formalism explicitly argued that art is the avant-garde of culture, and indeed the outstanding formalist avant-garde art movement of the first half of the twentieth century made a point to resist any public, social or moralist pressure in order to serve at the cultural vanguard. The resistance practiced by the avant-garde culture rested on "a superior consciousness of history, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society" (Greenberg 1984, 4). Accordingly, Greenberg, the chief formalist of the last stage of modernist aesthetics, writes in his 1939 "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" that formalist philosophy of art and art collaborated to maintain this regulative model:

The true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to "experiment," but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. "Art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.

(Greenberg 1984, 5)

On these lines, the very model of individual freedom is free and autonomous art. As explained, the formalist construes artistic form as a distinct perspective on freedom and commitment, in opposition to the preordained content mandated by the structures of oppression. It is the freedom to concentrate on the artistic form, and not the obligation to convey meaning or ethical beliefs, that liberates art from external commitment, rendering it autonomous and immune to being co-opted by the power structures of the day (Gal 2022, 26–27). Nevertheless, general autonomy will not suffice; art's freedom is dialectically achieved by devotion to its *explicit medium*, organized in an aesthetic form. This is the "unique and proper area of competence of each art," as Greenberg calls it in his retrospective 1960 "Modernist Painting." Since, as Wilde had argued, "each art has its grammar and its material," formalism refers to the form created within the limits of each artistic medium (Wilde 2013, 1595). That is to say, each individual form of art ought to be freed from commitments external to itself, eschewing the dominion or even influence of rival arts. If art is exploited to "deliver the message," its medium loses autonomy and distinct character. To secure art's freedom and its status as a model of freedom, each medium of art should be free to operate within its own

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framework. In this relation, formalism endorses Lessing's canonical account of the essential difference between spatial and temporal arts presented in *Laocoön, or the Limitations of Poetry* from 1765. Pater elaborates these ideas in a more general application in his 1877 edition of *Renaissance*: "The sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind" (Pater 1998, 83). If art is but the 'translation' of a message, as many critics mistakenly assume, then "the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is made a matter of indifference" (Pater 1998, 83). Following Pater, Wilde presents the dialectical structure of art in *The English Renaissance of Art*, delivered on his American lecture tour: "This limitation is for the artist perfect freedom: it is at once the origin and the sign of his strength. So that all the supreme masters of style—Dante, Sophocles, Shakespeare—are the supreme masters of spiritual and intellectual vision also" (Wilde 2013, 1450).

The dialectical relations between the limitation imposed by the medium and the freedom of art does not end here. In a celebrated passage, Pater explains the nature of these relations by adverting to music as the freest art, given its relatively abstract medium in which content and form reach the completest fusion: "*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*" (Pater 1998, 86, emphasis in original). He adds that painting incurs the highest risk of colonization by other arts, mainly by literature or poetry ("it is in popular judgments of pictures that the false generalization of all art into forms of poetry is most prevalent"), hence of being co-opted in the service of external goals (Pater 1998, 86). This claim is echoed by the late formalist Greenberg in "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in which he portrays the rule of literature as the "dominant art" from the seventeenth century onward (though music was said to be the "greatest art"), causing the arts that had surrendered it to "deny their own nature," that is, to forego their essential qualities and self-fulfillment (Greenberg 1988, I:26). The overtaking by literature sent the special nature of other arts into deep concealment. Given that literature is an obstacle to the freedom of the various arts, Greenberg (like Pater before him) calls for the musicality of the arts as immunity against the inroads of literature. This sheds a light on the musical titles chosen by some formalist painters for their works, such as Whistler's *Nocturnes* series, Matisse's *Harmony in Red*, or Wassily Kandinsky's *Composition* series. Resorting to musicality is thus not aimed at substituting the dominion of music for that of literature, but at freeing the other arts to attain their individual essential nature.

These formalist ideas have important consequences for the practice of criticism in art. Thus, artistic criticism should allow art to achieve its self-justification and self-standing moral status. Not only is art able to demonstrate its unique power of composition, but each art should demonstrate what it alone can supply. According to Pater, art criticism should endorse the independent moral status of each individual art, rather than becoming unduly focused on the "message" of the artwork, at the cost of treating the art's medium as a mere instrument. Note that Pater characterizes the activation of the unique formal power of each artistic medium of art as its responsibility:

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One of the functions of aesthetic criticism is to define these limitations; to estimate the degree in which a given work of art fulfils its responsibilities to its special material; to note in a picture that true pictorial charm, which is neither a mere poetical thought nor sentiment, on the one hand, nor a mere result of communicable technical skill in colour or design, on the other; to define in a poem that true poetical quality, which is neither descriptive nor meditative merely, but comes of an inventive handling of rhythmical language—the element of song in the singing; to note in music the musical charm—that essential music, which presents no words, no matter of sentiment or thought, separable from the special form in which it is conveyed to us.

(Pater 1998, 83)

In brief, criticism ought to align with the project of artistic freedom by pushing art to reach its "special form." The benefit of embracing the proper function of criticism is the acquisition of "new ontological

spheres,” to the disambiguation and explication of which I now turn.

Alternative Ontology

Fin-de-siècle aestheticists and formalists were accused by contemporary critics of yielding to decadence, and of making an undue appeal to the exemption of art from external morality in favor of “responsibility to its special material” (Pater 1998, 83). Whether the objection bears weight is moot; in explaining that “to those who are preoccupied with the beauty of form nothing else seems of much importance,” Wilde for example was certainly toying with decadent ideas of a marvelous but morally declining art (Wilde 2013, 1264). Wilde’s critique of Victorian moralism and the didactic realist art movement of his time was taken a step further: “There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot rewrite the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be” (Wilde 2013, 1274). Truth-based or “useful” art was distinguished from beauty, as he claims in “The Decay of Lying”—a canonical anti-realist constructivist essay in which he clamored for autonomy on behalf of art. The protagonist of his 1885 essay “Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study of Green,” T. G. Wainewright, who also happened to be a notorious dandy and suspected serial-killer of the Victorian era, is depicted both as a poisoner and a brilliant artist, whose value as an artist is defended by Wilde, who contended that “the fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose” (Wilde 2013, 1293). The expression of extreme views was no doubt for Wilde a direct affront to moralism as promoting low-value art: “The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art, though they may serve as an excellent advertisement for second-rate artists” (Wilde 2013, 1293).

p. 131 Though more irenic in their pronouncements, subsequent formalists belonging to modernist aesthetics supported Wilde’s sharp distinction between artistic spirit and moralism. However, they did not fail to grapple adequately with the idea of an internal normativity granted to art. Bell, for example, made it a point of not evading the question “what is the significance of anything as an end in itself? What is that which is left when we have stripped a thing of all its associations, of all its significance as a means? What is left to provoke our emotion?” His answer is “that which philosophers used to call ‘the thing in itself’ and now call ‘ultimate reality’” (Bell 1958, 45). In his review of Bell’s *Art*, Fry adds that his idea of significant form, “with all its possible implications of ultimate reality...rises to genuine artistic passion, is a thing of passionate import” (Fry 1996, 160). Bell’s formalism is clearly metaphysical, first and foremost. In the chapter titled “The Metaphysical Hypothesis,” he contends that reaching the “deeper” levels of reality is enabled through form, and that “visual artists come at reality generally through material form” (Bell 1958, 47). This explains why the creation of autonomous forms may lead to an expanded ontology. The artist sometimes sees reality as made of pure forms: “the perception of forms and formal relations” (Bell 1958, 48). Bell does not endorse extreme aestheticism according to which the artist merely aims to create significant form, subject to few or no material or intellectual constraints. Formalism, for him, is not wholly abstract and unconstrained. Medium, intention, and feeling for reality constitute the substance of the form.

Yet formalism goes beyond the claim that art is a model for individual freedom. Formalism stresses that due to its own self-regulated form, freed from external values, art exposes the viewer to an “ultimate reality”; that is, to alternative ontological spheres. This ability of art is closely related to modernism’s congruence with aspects of liberal humanism. Wilde’s inversion of the mimetic model of art is based on the proposition that “art has flowers that no forests know of, birds that no woodland possesses. She makes and unmakes many worlds, and can draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread. Hers are the ‘forms more real than living man,’ and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies” (Wilde 2013, 1260). That is to say, art possesses metaphorical and ontological abilities to create new realms, which in their turn prove to be the “model” of life—the symbolized rather than the symbol.

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Here Wilde sets out the bold claim that art when free can fracture the impression of necessity inherent in our experience of the familiar everyday life, in both a personal sense, and for society as a whole. For an illustrative use of metaphor, note that to “draw the moon from heaven with a scarlet thread” should not be dismissed as an escapist fantasy since it denotes no feasible action and thus seems to be content-free. On the contrary, the image is one that we are meant to take seriously, insofar as it perfectly illustrates the fracture in the obviousness of the “given,” that is, in what we take for granted in ordinary life. Furthermore, it is a perspective for the practice of humanist critical thought, a release from oppression, in Immanuel Kant’s words “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Perry 2012, 60). To the enlightenment’s emphasis on reason, formalism, influenced by romanticism, opposes a constructivist imagination. Imaginative life, Fry explains in his “Essay in Aesthetics,” is one in which, thanks to the absence of “responsive action,” which narrows the ambit of consciousness down to mere necessities, individuals can practice a contemplative oversight of their surroundings. Imaginative life opens the inner gaze beyond what is relevant to the established demands of ordinary life, and trains it to attend to elements and relations reorganized in new forms. This is the aesthetic life, said to be superior to real life, and led by art. Wilde formulates a similar view in “The Critic as Artist” with due force and eloquence:

Art can lead us away from surroundings whose beauty is dimmed to us by the mist of familiarity, or whose ignoble ugliness and sordid claims are marring the perfection of our development. It can help us to leave the age in which we were born, and to pass into other ages, and find ourselves not exiled from their air. It can teach us how to escape from our experience, and to realize the experiences of those who are greater than we are.

(Wilde 2013, 1334)

Art, as proposed above, has a significant and unique role in “materializing” humanist, liberalist ideas of freedom, by giving them concrete expression in the medium of each art form. This is the happy meeting point of autonomy, the power of composition to create what Bell calls a “sense of reality,” and ethics.

Note that historically, philosophical formalism was deeply immersed in modernist aestheticist-formalist art. Formalists were invested in curating exhibitions of post-Impressionist (a term coined by Fry) and later abstract-expressionist art, generating new conceptions of art to fit formalist art. At the same time, it highlighted the workings of artistic freedom through art, which stood as a model of individual freedom, presenting new ontological spheres. The catalog of the second post-Impressionist exhibition of 1912 organized by Fry reveals (according to him) the difficulties faced by visitors, accustomed to the realist-mimetic model of art, encountering the free ontological aspirations manifested by artists who participated in the first exhibition two years earlier. “These artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life” (Fry 1920, 157). Masters such as Paul Gauguin, George Braque, Matisse, and Cézanne were suspected of manipulating the public through fictitious attempts at art. The formalists, therefore, took it upon themselves to bring the public closer into relation with formalist art. Within the framework of modernism, formalist art was regarded as having philosophical, humanist, and liberal ambitions, whose goal was to secure art’s internal normativity and ethical status as a model of individual freedom. “What modern art has to do in the service of culture,” said Pater, is “to rearrange the details of modern life, so to reflect it, that it may satisfy the spirit. And what does the spirit need in the face of modern life? The sense of freedom” (Pater 1998, 148).

Fry, too, aims to investigate “the relation of the modern movement in art to life” (Fry 1920, 6). To understand this relation, we need to return to the burgeoning of the impressionist movement in 1870. The early impressionists followed two main ideas, Fry claims in “Art and Life”:

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On the one hand they upheld, more categorically than ever before, the complete detachment of the artistic vision from the values imposed on vision by everyday life—they claimed, as Whistler did in his “10 o’clock,” to be pure artists. On the other hand, a group of them used this freedom for the quasi-scientific description of new effects of atmospheric colour and atmospheric perspective, thereby endowing painting with a quite new series of colour harmonies.

(Fry 1920, 7)

Fry stresses the fact that the most significant result of the new impressionist manner in art is the exposure of the public to new ontological spheres. “The effects thus explored were completely unfamiliar to the ordinary man, whose vision is limited to the mere recognition of objects with a view to the uses of everyday life” (Fry 1920, 7–8). While this gradually brought out a whole new tolerance in the viewing public, as Fry tells us, the public remained in constant need of aesthetic education to acknowledge and observe art’s aspiration to autonomy. Recall that Wilde held deep misgivings about the public’s desire to control art, usurping its autonomy time and time again. Public opinion, Wilde warns us in “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” tries to dictate “to the artist the form he is to use, the mode in which he is to use it, and the materials with which he is to work” (Wilde 2013, 1519). The progress of art, he adds, is enabled “entirely due to a few individual artists refusing to regard Art as a mere matter of demand and supply” (Wilde 2013, 1519).

Reissuing Wilde’s warnings, Bell and Fry note that many works to the public’s liking are only “fictitiously” moral. Because one cannot respond to a work of art through action, an ethical response to a work of art is in fact fictitious, proving that morality in art is an inappropriate exploitation of the medium. Bell’s distinction between the subject matter of an ethical judgment and the status of art as ethical by itself is drawn conjointly with the related contrast between “descriptive” and “real” works of art, to the extent that the latter contrast sheds light on the former. Descriptive work, according to Bell, is subordinate to an external referent, holding out an invitation to participate in a nonaesthetic experience that falls outside the remit of art. Sir Luke Fildes’s popular artwork *The Doctor* is presented as an illustration. *The Doctor* is supposed to infect the viewer with the doctor and parent’s worry about a very sick child. However, Bell and Fry disparage its sentimentality, claiming that it is not a work of art since it is about emotion rather than being itself an object of emotion. *The Doctor* is labeled as a descriptive painting by Bell, thus “not being a work of art, *The Doctor* has more of the immense ethical value possessed by all objects that provoke aesthetic ecstasy” (Bell 1958, 24). Fry further asserts in his “The Meaning of Pictures” that it is “false” and “profoundly wrong,” inviting us to participate in an “extra-artistic” and inauthentic moral experience. As he explains, “we feel here an invitation to identify oneself with the doctor; we feel that we, too, are capable of this devotion, and we get a certain moral satisfaction which we have done nothing to earn. I suspect that a great deal of the attraction of sentimental art and sentimental stories comes from an indulgence in this fictitious sense of one’s moral worth” (Fry 1996, 398). Descriptive forms are but imitations of familiar forms, bringing the viewers back to their familiar lives, devoid of aspiration to freedom.

p. 134 By contrast, Cézanne’s oeuvre, much discussed and admired by the formalists, is said to bring about a paradigmatic presentation of new values through new forms. Cézanne produced “the new conception of art,” Fry claims. Cézanne’s creation of new forms constituted a denunciation of the conventional use of perspective in painting and was deemed definitive of the modernist emphasis on autonomous forms. His endorsement of multiple viewpoints broke with tradition and insulated his works from outside influence. The “deformation” of objects, as formalist artist and thinker Maurice Denis called it, or “distorted forms of objects,” as Erle Loran, a salient critic of Cézanne, calls it (Loran 1943, 29), could exist only in painting. In analyzing Cézanne’s various still lifes with plates and pitchers, Loran argues that the practice of distortion was central to anti-mimetic formalist art, explaining the role of the distortions of forms in creating an ontological independent space. He asserts that abstract art was deeply influenced by Cézanne’s intentional distortion. The presence of distortions in the picture plane was deemed forceful and dynamic, putting it in a relation of tension to other visual planes present in the picture. Loran tells the readers that “the result is a

new, more exciting illusion of space than any mechanical perspective drawing could give. The distortion of natural shapes is thus seen as a positive ‘form-conditioning’ factor” (Loran 1943, 32).

This practice of art brings us directly to the problem of its ethical status. What Loran names “illusion of space” is not an illusion for Fry, but a space that belongs to the imaginative life. Its centrality to actual life reveals it to be intimately related to ethics. Where one can react, one is ethically committed to doing so, if a situation arises in which it is required to act. Conversely, the lack of “responsive” reaction in imaginative life exempts it from external moral commitment: “Responsive action implies in actual life moral responsibility. In art we have no such moral responsibility—it presents a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence” (Fry 1920, 14). But this makes art free and in so-doing allows it to body forth one of the central values of ethical life. Art thus presents us with new ontological spheres, by creating opportunities for viewers to view the world in new ways—to actually enter new worlds. “Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life,” Bell famously claims (Bell 1958, 27, 29). Do viewers wish to be free? The viewers who cannot but look behind the artistic medium for traces of their own lives are called “weak” by Bell: “Instead of going out on the stream of art into a new world of aesthetic experience, they turn a sharp corner and come straight home to the world of human interests” (Bell 1958, 29).

p. 135 It is hard to resist the conclusion that it is the responsibility of the viewer to allow art to lead them to new horizons: to conclude this chapter, it is apt to raise a few questions to set new directions consonant with the main thrust of the discussion. Do human beings aspire to be lifted from the quotidian “given,” the stream of life, to the unfamiliar? Do they truly aspire to freedom? The fragility of democracy raises the deep worry that the freedom that liberalism offers humanity is not always desired. For the weak viewers, Bell claims, “the significance of a work of art depends on what they bring to it; no new thing is added to their lives, only the old material is stirred” (Bell 1958, 29). However, Fry strongly claims that imaginative life is an integral part of our nature and our deepest fulfillment. Grasping and delighting in compositions is natural for us as the kind of species we are: a species dedicated to and permeated by the visual. In this sense, Fry was one of the most visionary figures among the formalists. Long after formalism had reached its zenith, Michael Fried reviewed Fry’s aesthetics in relation to the ethical status of art, claiming “this is the core of his so-called formalist esthetics, the conviction that all persons capable of experiencing esthetic emotion in front of paintings are responding when they do so to relations of pure form—roughly, of ideated volumes in relation both to one another and to the surface and shape of the canvas” (Fried 2001, 6).

See also: Shapshay, Song, Stear, Lamarque, this volume

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Notes

- 1 For a discussion, see Cross, this volume.
- 2 For more detailed discussions, see Costelloe and Shapshay, both in this volume.
- 3 For more about the distinction between interpretive vs. formalist criticism, see Chapter 6, “Criticism versus Interpretation” in my Gal, 2015, 119–130.
- 4 The term “aestheticism” has been used in multiple ways. See Rothfeld, this volume, for more discussion.