The Good the Bad and the Beautiful: The Ethics of Art

Course Description

What, if anything, is the relationship between art and morality? Can art be *immoral*? Or is it a mistake to evaluate a work of art in such terms? Can the moral of a content of a work bear on its *aesthetic value*, that is, whether it is *good art*? What of the moral status of artists—does the (im)morality of an *artist* bear on the success of her work? Should art serve as an instrument of moral education? A force for liberation? A method of unifying people? How do the arts shape who and what is seen? And how should we think of the representation (or appropriation) of race, gender, and culture in the arts? This course will challenge students to grapple with questions of art, ethics, and the human condition alongside contemporary and historical thinkers alike—from Plato to Confucius to Tolstoy. In addition to philosophical texts, we will engage with a wide variety of art, including poetry, film, theater, painting, sketch comedy, classical music, rock and roll, and games. And maybe most importantly, we will engage with one another—this is a class in which all of us will be *doing philosophy together*, working through what we think about fundamental questions of art and ethics. The seminar will meet in the Harvard Art Museums, providing opportunities to see many of the course's central artworks in person and consider questions about the ethically and politically significant work of art collection and exhibition.

Instructors:

Prof. Quinn White, pqwhite@fas.harvard.edu

Meeting Times and Place:

Class: Tuesday 12-2:45 am, Harvard Art Museum 006 (and Art Study Room)
Office Hours: Tuesday, 3-5pm, Emerson Hall, 204

Course Readings:

Most course readings are available on the website. In addition, four books are required:

- Matthes, Erich, *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies* (available here)
- Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (available here)
- Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Letters to a Young Poet* (trans. Norton) (available here)
- Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (available here)
- Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* (trans. Volohonsky) (available here)
- Saito, Yuriko, *The Aesthetics of Care* (available here)

Grading and Assessment

- Attendance, participation, forum posts (10% of final grade).
    - All students are expected to have fully read the material and come prepared with questions, confusions, responses, and thoughts on it. This will be a class in which

we *learn to do philosophy together*, and there is *no expectation* that students come to class having fully (or even at all!) understood the material. Some of it is really tough!! But coming with a sense of *what was confusing* is key. In class, all students are expected to engage in discussion.
    - Before each class, students will write a brief (2-4 sentences) post in canvas that raises a clarificatory question (something that was confusing, puzzling, needs development, etc.) or a critical question or comment (raise a possible objection, challenge, or critical inquiry)
- Presentations (10% of final grade)
    - Students will lead seminar once over the term for 10-15 minutes; in doing so, students will make a *short* presentation (about 5 min) and provide guiding questions for class discussion. Presentations can take one of two forms: either a reconstruction of a *small part* of the week's reading, followed by questions for the class to consider and discuss; or a presentation of a work of art (that takes less than 5 minutes to view, watch, listen to, experience, play, etc.) that connects to the topics we have discussed in the course.
    - Students presenting *must meet with me* the week prior to discuss a plan for the presentation. (Note we will work on these together! They are *low pressure*.)
- Papers: (must be written in and submitted via google docs)
    - Paper 1: Reconstruction, 500 words, due of end week 4, 11:59pm (15% of final grade)
    - Paper 2a: Reconstruction and Evaluation, 1250 words, due end of week 8, 11:59pm (20% of final grade)
    - Paper 2b: Rewrite of paper 2a in response to feedback and suggestions for expansion, 1500 words, Due end Week 11, 11:59pm (20% of final grade)
    - Paper 3: Reconstruction and Evaluation OR Choose your own prompt/project, 1500 words (project requirements can be agreed on together), due end of term, 11:59 pm (25% of final grade)
- Late Policy
    - Students will have 3 free late days to use throughout the semester as they see fit. You can use these three days to turn papers in late without penalty and without having an excuse or prior approval. (For example, you could turn in Paper 1 two days late, Paper 2 on time, and Paper 3 one day late.) Unexcused late work beyond the first two days will lose ⅓ grade per day (e.g., a B paper will receive a B-). Extensions beyond the three late days can be granted with *prior* approval from Prof. White.
- SAT/UNS
    - Like all freshman seminars, final grades in this class are recorded as either Satisfactory (C- or higher) or Unsatisfactory.

Chat GPT Use

I expect that all work students submit for this course will be their own. As a default, I specifically forbid the use of ChatGPT or any other generative artificial intelligence tools at all stages of the work process, including preliminary ones. If you have a use for generative text AI (including

writing an essay that engages with the its functionality), let me know and I will be happy to clear it for limited use in advance. To enforce this requirement, I will require students write their essays (in their entirety) in Google Docs and turn in assignments by sharing them with editing privileges; I'll then be able to see the document history of the paper. Violations of this policy will be considered academic misconduct. We draw your attention to the fact that different classes at Harvard could implement different AI policies, and it is the student's responsibility to conform to expectations for each course.

Additional Requirements

- You should expect to disagree with things we read, your peers, and me. These disagreements may be vigorous but must always be reasoned and respectful.
- No laptops or electronics will be permitted in class unless a student has some exceptional need; in that case, just let me know.

Schedule and Readings (NOTE DATES ARE NOT ACCURATE)

Unit I. The Good and The Beautiful: Ethics and Aesthetics

September 5: Do immoral artists ruin art?
Matthes, Intro & Chapter 1 (pp. 1–40)
Optional: Anderson, "Racist Humor" (pp. 501–9)

September 12: What should we *do* in response to immoral artists?
Matthes Ch. 2-3 (pp. 41–115)
Optional: Ross, *Wagnerism*, Ch. 6, 14 (pp. 230–77)

Unit II. Love & Art

September 26: Love, Beauty, Possession
Plato, "The Symposium"
Montiero, "Race Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past"
HAMILTON WATCH PARTY 9/22

October 3: Loving Beauty in Art and People
Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, excerpts
Paper 1 Due, Friday Oct 6 11:59pm

October 10: Seeing Well, Seeing Truly
Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, excerpts

October 17: Caring Relationships
Saito, The Aesthetics of Care, Ch. 1, §§2.2, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.1 (only pp. 126-132), 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6.1

Unit III. Art and the Artist in Society

October 24: Art, Emotion, and Unity
Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, §§4, 5, 8, 10, 15, 16, 18 (61 pages)

October 31: Art as Soulcraft
Plato, *Republic*, selections (pp. 56–65, 576c1–383c6)
Selections from Confucius, *The Analects* & Mozi, "A Condemnation of Musical Performances" (3 pages)
Rousseau, "Letter to D'Alembert on the establishment of a theater in Geneva" (pp. 92–138)
Paper 2a Due, Friday 11:59 pm

November 7: Art for the Artist's Sake
Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (pp. 1–58)

Unit IV. Representation, Appropriation

November 14: Artifacts, Cultural Patrimony, and the Museum
Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, selections
Optional: Stuff The British Stole ep. 2 "Blood Art" (podcast available here)
Appiah, "Whose Culture is it Anyway?" (pp. 115–135)
Eaton and Gaskell, "Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Museums" (pp. 235–267)
Hartcollis, "Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, not Harvard, a Lawsuit Says"
Paper 2b Due, Friday, 11:59 pm

Nov. 21 Cultural Appropriation
Artworld Roundtable: Is Cultural Appropriation Ever Okay?
Nguyen and Strohl, "Cultural appropriation and the intimacy of groups"
Matthes, "Cultural appropriation and oppression"
Schutz, *Open Casket* (painting on Canvas)

Unit V. Games

November 28: What is a Game? Why Play Them?
Suits, *The Grasshopper*, (pp. 1–43, 151–80)

December 5: Games as agential art
Play *Hanabi*
Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art*, Ch. 1, 5, 8, 10 (pp. 1–26, 101–20, 167–89, 216–24)
(Optional: come to board game night, tbd time and date!)
Paper 3 (or project) due on date assigned for final exam (there is no exam)