

BOOK REVIEW

Human Flourishing, Liberal Theory, and the Arts

MENACHEM MAUTNER

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This significant and pioneering book argues that art plays a central role in human flourishing, that the state should therefore both support art and allow art to fulfill this role, and that no theory of flourishing will be complete without addressing this role. In order to support these interrelated propositions, *Human Flourishing, Liberal Theory, and the Arts* skillfully and profoundly brings together aesthetics with theories of law, or, better yet, philosophy of art with social and political thought. It does so through what the author Menachem Mautner names ‘the liberalism of flourishing’. This field of study tries to formulate a philosophical definition of the concept of ‘flourishing’, with the aim of identifying the material-social-intellectual conditions required for human beings to reach their potential and live their lives to the fullest. Moreover, the liberalism of flourishing aspires to present a further, prescriptive, proposition about the state’s institutional obligation to enable its citizens to live good lives, or, better yet, the active role that the state ought to take in supporting the flourishing of its citizens.

To be sure, for art to be autonomous and at the same time funded by the state, and for it to be institutionally accessible and disseminated to the various sections of society, might prove contradictory. The influential power of art, which is sometimes found effective by governments or the market, hence calls for recruitment or censorship. Well aware of this, Mautner offers a detailed and specific means to ‘prevent political interference that may arise when the state is involved in art funding’ and dissemination (116). He does so by applying to art ‘successful

examples of institutional arrangements designed to allow professional bodies to function autonomously and maintain the internal goods of practices, immune from political interference, even though these bodies are dependent on state funding’ (136). Mautner argues that, in addition to the liberalism of flourishing, the proposed means will allow all wings of liberalism to support the state funding of art, including the recent neutralist liberalism, as formulated by John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin. Moreover, according to Mautner, art is to be subsumed under the category that Rawls labels as ‘natural primary goods’ (which are distinguished from ‘social goods’), since natural goods include vigour, intelligence and imagination, and art is a primary means to develop all of these.

It can be seen, then, that Mautner’s project is the political-science counterpart of those contemporary aesthetic theories that address *art in relation to the state* and characterize the viewer as a *citizen* first and foremost (rather than as a mere viewer or consumer, for example), starting with certain interpretations of Plato’s *Republic*, then of romanticism and modernist aesthetics and the Frankfurt School texts, and continuing up to the school of Art Theory that emerged mainly in Art History departments and within Visual Culture studies. Looking at contemporary analytic aesthetics, theories of art that characterize the viewer as a member of a community are formulated mainly within the combined study of aesthetics and politics, and in the subfields of participatory and relational aesthetics, as well as within the study of aesthetics and race, and in feminist aesthetics. But analytic aesthetics could and should go further here in thinking of art as an integral part of the state—nowadays more than ever, given the ongoing crisis of the Enlightenment’s humanist ideals. While in the Enlightenment’s version of humanism, ‘emphasis was laid on the ability of individuals to emancipate themselves and to

constitute their personal and social lives on the basis of their human reason', parts of Western democratic society are now in the midst of an ongoing recession of personal freedom and humanist standards (42). Moreover, the theoretical method used by Mautner in this book (and in his other numerous texts) is not only closely related to analytic philosophy—Mautner is committed to clarity, solid propositions and careful analyses of concepts—but is also philosophical in character. Accordingly, the light that the book sheds on the inherent connection that art and aesthetics bears to society and the state, as well as its analysis of art and human nature, rights and social ontology, and the connection that the book draws between aesthetics and law, are likely to prove very helpful to the discussion of the essence of art.

Distinguishing between autonomous and comprehensive versions of the liberalism of flourishing, Mautner endorses the *comprehensive* version, namely, the version according to which the good life enables individuals to bring to fruition not merely their intellectual and moral capabilities, but their various human capabilities as well. Mautner considers the comprehensive liberalism of flourishing to be the 'heir to the Western humanist tradition of two and a half millennia whose ideal is the creation of the conditions that will allow individuals to freely and completely develop and realize their humanness to the utmost extent' (41). Among human capabilities, the creative, aesthetic, artistic ones—of both creators and beholders—are considered by Mautner to be especially significant: he stresses the fact that 'many philosophers and authors, throughout history, have claimed that *art* provides us with wisdom, insight, oppositional political consciousness, and moral education' (7). Indeed, Mautner methodically delineates a long thread of various propositions of this sort, concerning the aforementioned effect of art, as well as the exclusive and inimitable emotional, cognitive and psychological contribution of art to life, selfhood and personal identity. Therefore, Mautner proposes two interrelated descriptive claims that put forward the very combination that this book embodies: between art theory and political theory. First, engagement

with art is a primary means of intellectual and moral development. The very use of the concept of 'means' reveals this assertion to be anti-formalist. Moreover, I think, it recruits art to extra-artistic aims, and thus may dialectically put its autonomy at risk. But it does coalesce with contemporary, very recent, theories of relational aesthetics and participatory art. Second, the possible effects of engagement with art 'are directly related to the ideals of the good life of the liberalism of flourishing' (91). This supports the main normative claim of comprehensive liberalism, concerning the state's obligation to support art and make it accessible.

It is important to note, though, that both versions of the liberalism of flourishing, autonomous and comprehensive, 'expect the state to be active in promoting the social conditions for flourishing', and that both are logically and internally connected to an endorsement of social democracy and are therefore considered to be social liberalisms (2). It is within society that human beings realize their inherent and universal creativity that allows a meaningful life, brought about by a convergence between 'mind categories and meaning-bearing objects' as well as by their ongoing internalization (7). Mautner turns to Gadamer here. But it is well known that quite a few philosophies of art define artworks as meaningful objects, namely, as objects that carry a semantic charge (that is to say, as symbols), and as having roles in constituting the meanings of people's lives, and in living these lives to the fullest.

Since creating and consuming art are significant, the comprehensive version is more suitable for addressing art within human flourishing studies. This, of course, leads us directly to the role of art in flourishing, and to this book's clear relevance for philosophy of art and aesthetics, as well as to its contribution to understanding one of the core philosophical areas of study: human nature. Art is one of the meta-systems of what Mautner calls the 'big meanings' that respond to the central human question. Like law, art may take part in replacing religion as a system that underlies human existence.

The structure of *Human Flourishing, Liberal Theory, and the Arts* is didactic and instructive. It sets out a

big theory, but does so carefully and precisely: proposing big and abstract ideas about art, as directly linked to the proper characterization of human beings and their well-being as social beings whose rights to freedom and self-fulfillment are natural, while referring to the numerous relevant theories that have examined these rights from various angles throughout the Western history of ideas. The introduction presents the conceptual and theoretical apparatus that underlies Mautner's theory: principally, the concepts of 'political liberalism'; 'comprehensive liberalism', which is usually classified as 'autonomy liberalism', which in turn presents personal autonomy as the very essence of the good life; and a distinct kind of comprehensive liberalism which is the 'liberalism of flourishing', whose roots are to be found in John Stuart Mill and the British Modernists. Mautner sees Mill as one of the forefathers of the modern linkage of flourishing not only to the cultivation of intellectual and moral capabilities, but also to autonomy—'life unmolded by social conventions' (23). These concepts are juxtaposed with two modernist concepts of 'perfectionism' and 'waste' with regard to ethics and political theories. Mautner does not refrain from modernist reasoning, nor from the 'ideal of individual and social improvement on the basis of human reason' (18) that was inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment. 'Perfectionism' refers to the claim that there are capabilities that are essential for a perfect life, as well as corresponding measures that the state ought to take to allow its citizens to acquire and develop them. Mautner stresses that autonomist liberalism and the liberalism of flourishing are in no way supportive of the paternalist or coercive molding of individuals, but rather endorse 'creating the background conditions necessary for the good life', in order to promote free subjective choices (2). 'Waste' refers to life in which human capabilities—the ones that bring about humanness—are neglected, undeveloped or not realized. According to Mautner, a cultivated life is conditioned upon the community and the state. And so, the liberalism of flourishing argues, waste 'is wholly the product of human deeds, namely repugnant social arrangements' (5).

Accordingly, Part I of the book introduces the linearity of the liberalism of flourishing as an *intellectualist-moralist* movement whose roots are to be found in classical philosophy. This is followed by an account of the comprehensive liberalism of flourishing—going all the way from Aristotle to Martha Nussbaum. Aristotle, claims Mautner, is the originator of the school of intellectualist-moralist flourishing. His writings on flourishing and his theory of the morally significant life and human nature may be interpreted as a source for the comprehensive version of flourishing as well. The same interpretation may be applied to Nussbaum's thick theory of the good, whose universalist concept of 'human dignity', 'is very much inspired by Aristotle's comprehensive account of flourishing' (47), and is defined as directly dependent on support from the environment—in other words, the state. Only the environment can promote human flourishing as a life of developed and realized capabilities, in contrast to a wasted life in which human beings are deprived of essential human capabilities and 'are fruitless, cut off, in some way but a shadow of themselves'. These universal capabilities (Nussbaum lists ten essential ones) coalesce with personal-individual capabilities and admit 'of much multiple specification in accordance with varied local and personal conceptions' (50). Thus, Mautner here portrays the comprehensive liberalism of flourishing as a line of thought that interestingly combines two layers of humanist thought: universal humanness regarding human rights to realize each individual's various abilities, and the subjective humanness of the personal uniqueness of these abilities. These competing strata of humanism are assuredly and exactly embodied by free art, and indeed this chapter is the infrastructure of Mautner's analysis of the right relationship between the state and art.

Part II methodically presents various assumptions about art as a 'unique and indispensable source of insight' (106), and hence as crucial for both intellectual and moral development, leading to the conclusion that engaging with art is a primary means of each individual's flourishing. Four of art's contributions to one's life—wisdom, insights about the human

condition, critical thought, and controversies regarding our social order and moral education—are in accord with the conditions of the good life as characterized by the liberalism of flourishing. The perfect fit between art's imports and the good life calls for, even dictates, the dissemination of all arts among all classes and age grades. These assertions are followed by a firm imperative that appoints the state, rather than the market, to do this job. Claiming that 'the state should be guided first and foremost by the principle that the best should be made available to the most' (117), Mautner provides an expository and thorough presentation of the central policies of culture ministries and governmental departments in Western states since World War II up until today. A crucial moment in this history, during the 1980s, generates one of the motivations for Mautner's project. The eighties, he claims, brought about a transformation of policies—that is to say, an ethical shift in the relations between art and the state. Neoliberal modes of thinking drove many Western countries to reduce state support for the creation and dissemination of art, allowing the market—its corporations, as well as its terminology—to take over.

Clearly, a reversal of this anti-art structure is strongly required. And it ought to be designed without politicizing its organization by the state, while allowing art to maintain its essential *internal* standards of merit and excellence, which are classified as 'internal goods' by Alasdair MacIntyre. In this part of the book, Mautner follows MacIntyre's distinctions between practices (which are attributed with internal and external goods) and institutions, which he finds helpful for the needed reversal. Institutions deal with external goods—consequently, no practice can survive unsustained by institutions—while at the same time 'the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution' and the corrupting power of institutions (137). One of the innovative steps that are taken by Mautner is the *application of this structure of institutions and practices to art* (which possesses internal standards of merit) and the state (which is an institution involved in the acquisition and distribution of external

goods of practices, such as money, power, status and prestige).

Moreover, he sets out an ethical infrastructure for protecting the practice of art's essential freedom—namely, to keep it art. This consists of three parts. First, he points to the required character of the people who are to be involved in this project: 'What can immunize this practice from corruption is the existence of both people and institutional arrangements carrying the virtues of justice, courage, honesty, and truthfulness. Put differently, to immunize state-supported art from the *ulterior* considerations of the institution of the state, we need *honest people* committed to the standards of excellence of the art practice, and a proper *organizational culture* in the institutions supporting the arts' (136). Second, he points to the required basic character of the *involved institutions*: in order to protect the autonomy of art and professional bodies from the 'ulterior considerations' that may be involved in art funding, institutional buffers between professional bodies and the political field should be devised. Third, he supplies current examples of actual embodiments of these required buffers in order to show their feasibility: in the courts, academia, and the arts. For example (the most obvious one, according to Mautner), in common law countries, 'judges are supposed to enjoy life tenure, and to run the state court system by means of massive funding on the part of the government, on the one hand, but (to a great extent under the auspices of Montesquieu's and Madison's "separation of branches" doctrine) with virtually no interference in their rulings and internal affairs on the part of states' political branches, on the other' (136). Moreover, common law courts are designed to be separate from the general culture, having clear and steady values of justice, which are uninfluenced by power-holders within the state. A parallel structure characterizes the *state funding of academia*, the freedom of whom 'in managing their internal affairs' is relatively secured, as well as the internal values of academic merit and excellence, as issued by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2003. These and other buffer mechanisms that Mautner surveys should be applied

to art and its relations with the state and the political field. This is a significant point that posits a direct link between the philosophy of art and its political environment, stimulating further philosophical thought about the suitability of the state and the community to the essence of art.

The last section of the book is somewhat self-standing and deserves its own space: it is a presentation of art as a system of big meaning, parallel to law (and religion)—namely, a system that endows life with comprehensive humanistic infrastructure, sense and spirit. Still, it is implied throughout the whole book that art provides a big meaning, and thus serves as a foundation for human flourishing. It is no wonder that Mautner's philosophy of law meets aesthetics through John Dewey's pragmatism. After all, in his 1925 book *Experience and Nature*, Dewey sets out a normative model of experience, which is dependent on the members of the community using tools of community—symbols and means of expression and communication—to allow for self-fulfillment. Self-fulfillment enabled by social practices is exactly what the flourishing theoretician promotes, precisely for endowing human life with meaning, values and creativity. Dewey's concept of 'experience' is not an

internalist one of mental images. It rather concerns the shared social activity of symbolically mediated behavior that seeks to discover the possibilities of our personal situations for a meaningful life. Art is the discipline that does this best. Dewey describes the *idea* of the continuous experience of art as the 'greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity'.¹

Therefore, aesthetics ought to address Mautner's central assertion that although the majority of Western children are educated in schools, this is not the case with adults. Therefore, given that 'developing one's intellectual and moral capabilities is a never-ending lifelong project' (9), nowadays the liberalism of flourishing 'needs to be extended from children to *adults*, and ... this may be achieved mainly by way of creating the conditions allowing adults to engage with art'. Here, rightly, as Aeschylus says in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, 'Schoolboys have a master to teach them, grown-ups have the poets' (88).

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1 John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1980 [1934]), 25.