

## Reading Guide for Friedrich Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*

It's worth reading all of the letters, but here's an abridged reading assignment that gets to the heart of Schiller's vision, from the German Library edition: Letters 1-8 (pp. 86-107) and 12-15 (pp. 118-132); Letters 21-23 (pp. 146-156) and 27 (pp. 171-178)

### Overview

Schiller's *Letters* are a sustained attempt to articulate a theory of human excellence that is essentially *aesthetic*. He thinks that human beings, both individually and collectively, cannot reach their highest potential unless they engage with *beauty*, or aesthetic value, in a certain way. The common translation of his title is a little misleading. The book is not about 'education' as you typically think about it. It's about people raising themselves and each other up to their highest selves, becoming as excellent as they can be. He thinks beauty is necessary for that because (1) a certain kind of *human freedom* is our highest ideal and (2) *aesthetic freedom* is essential to it. A better translation of his German title is *On the Aesthetic Upbringing of Humanity in a Series of Letters*.

Here, in a nutshell, is Schiller's vision: We all spend a lot of time and energy gaining control over our lives. We have this control, or this *autonomy*, when we have good values, goals, and routines and are able to pursue them. Autonomy is what you exercise and work toward as you figure out your major, work hard for good grades, develop your sense of the kind of life you want to live, and live it. Schiller thinks that autonomy is an extremely important kind of freedom, but he thinks there's a *higher* freedom that human beings can achieve when they combine their autonomy with *aesthetic freedom*. Autonomy gives us control over our lives, but, Schiller thinks, it also limits us to think, feel, and experience the world in very specialized ways. Your actions, experiences, preferences, and values will differ radically depending on whether you become a doctor, lawyer, professor, have kids, live in the US or abroad, and so on. As good as it is to structure your life in this way, such structure can also cut you off from the real richness of the world. Schiller thinks that beauty jolts us out of our autonomy-governed modes of experience and action and puts us in a *more open* state. This is the state of aesthetic freedom, which Schiller calls 'play'. In play we are no longer constrained to think, experience, and act in the ways defined by our normal values, goals, and routines. Schiller's ideal of human excellence *combines* autonomy with aesthetic freedom. He thinks that we are our best and freest selves when we live autonomous lives, when we have our lives under control, but are nonetheless able to engage with beauty, to 'play' and be aesthetically free. This *human* freedom allows us to socialize and love more openly and to truly appreciate the beauty and equality of other individuals. That is why he thinks that humanity *as a whole* cannot be truly sociable, equal, and *politically free* unless we all strive to attain this ideal of human excellence.

### Details of Schiller's Argument

Schiller's argument for this is complex, but we can break it up into the following nine claims. You won't be in a position to understand this nine-step argument until you understand the central concepts that Schiller develops. Read through the argument now, but refer back to it as you work through Schiller's text:

1. Aesthetic value (beauty) is the capacity to engage the play drive.
2. To engage the play drive is to cause a state of volitional openness.
3. The capacity to play, to enter this state of volitional openness (or aesthetic freedom), is a necessary condition of the achievement of human freedom.
4. The other drives, the sensuous and rational drives, and the objects that engage them, are, by themselves, antithetical to this state.
5. So aesthetic value is the only path to individual freedom.
6. Having a social character requires recognizing the humanity of others.
7. To recognize the humanity of others we must play with aesthetic value.
8. There cannot be a politically free state unless its citizens have social characters.
9. So aesthetic value is the only path to political freedom.

I have broken up the reading so that each series of letters introduces you to another set of important concepts that you will need to understand:

- The political problem that Schiller thinks can be addressed by beauty (L1-L8)
  - the tension between individuality and universality (L4-L8)
- His theory of beauty (L12-L15), which includes:
  - the sense drive and the form drive (L12-L14)
  - the play drive (L15)
  - living form (L15)
- His idea of *aesthetic freedom* and of ‘the aesthetic state’ or ‘the aesthetic mode of the psyche’ (L21-L23)
- His conception of ‘true sociability’ (L27)
- The connection between sociability, equality, and political freedom (L27)

### **Letters 1-8 (pp. 86-107)**

In L1-L8 Schiller lays out the main problem he aims to solve with his new way of thinking about human excellence.

At the end of L2 (p. 90), Schiller states his main idea, “if man is ever to solve that problem of politics in practice he will have to approach it through the problem of the aesthetic, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom.” In other words, beauty or ‘aesthetic value’ is what makes human beings truly free, and only if we understand this can we solve ‘the problem of politics’. He hasn’t yet said what the political problem is exactly, and we have to wait until L12-L15 to start to see how beauty is the solution.

Schiller states the ‘political problem’ in L4 (p. 92-95). Notice that Schiller uses certain *contrasts* to make his point—between *unity* and *multiplicity* or, more frequently, between *universality* and *individuality*. These contrasts are essential to his statement of the political problem, and you can’t read the rest of the *Letters* until you understand what the political problem is. So, what is it? After stating the problem in L4, Schiller elaborates on it in L6-L8. Study L4-L8 carefully and make sure you understand the political problem he aims to address.

### Letters 12-15 (pp. 118-132)

This is the section where Schiller develops his theory of beauty. Just as philosophers ask questions like *What is the nature of virtue?* or *What is knowledge?* they inquire into the nature of beauty or aesthetic value. So what is beauty? Schiller's answer is: *Beauty is the capacity to engage the play drive* (as stated in premise (1) above). To develop this theory of beauty, Schiller introduces the ideas of the *sensuous* or *sense* drive, the *formal* or *form* drive, the *play* drive, and *living form*, which is another term he uses for *beauty*.

On the one hand, we *sense* and *perceive* the material world, are drawn to its offerings and pleasures, feel emotions and desire, and use our imaginations. We are, in short, 'sensuous' beings who have a "sense drive" or a tendency to be drawn to and moved by our experiences, emotions, sensations, and so on. But we also have *intellectual* capacities that allow us to conceptually structure the world, to understand it, and to move practically through it via deliberation, commitment, and the pursuit of our values and ideals. We are, in short, 'rational' beings who have a "form drive" or a tendency to conceptual structure, generalization, pattern-recognition, forethought, and so on.

Schiller thinks that our form and sense drives are good. Our sensuous nature is the source of our individuality—you are drawn to certain colors, flavors, images, and experiences; I'm drawn to others. This results in rich variety among individuals, which for Schiller is something to be revealed, appreciated, and celebrated. Our rational nature is equally important, as it structures our world, orders ourselves and our lives, and allows us to live together morally.

But, and here's the problem, Schiller thinks that these tendencies inherently conflict—each 'drive' is 'earnest in its demands' and tends to override and silence the other. Either reason dominates sensibility and we lose touch with our individuality or sensibility dominates reason and we don't understand ourselves or the world. Either way, we become "at odds" with ourselves (L4, p. 94).

The play drive *combines and harmonizes* the sense and form drives. That is why Schiller calls what the play drive seeks *living form*. For Schiller, beauty *just is* what activates our play drives. In other words, aesthetic value is that which releases us from the constraints of our normal or everyday sense of self, that is, our normal ways of generalizing about and being attracted to the world.

Letters 12-14 prepare the way for the crescendo in L15, so read L12, L13, and L14 carefully.

### Letters 21-23 (pp. 146-156)

In this section Schiller develops his way of thinking about the special state that beauty puts us into—the *aesthetic state*. He calls this state a state of 'equanimity and freedom of the spirit' and a state of 'naught' or nothingness. What he means by this, as he explains, is that when we are engaging with beauty or aesthetic value our normal ways of experiencing, desiring, and thinking about the world are tempered, relaxed, less forceful and present. We are thereby *open* to new ways of thinking, desiring, and acting, and our normal ways of thinking and acting lose their typical force (or are *as if nothing*). This more open way of

thinking and acting is what play *is* for Schiller because in the aesthetic state of play our sense and form drives *harmonize* instead of conflict or try to dominate each other.

To make this more concrete, consider the following:

*New Cuisine:* On your walk home from work you have passed by a new restaurant a few times. You have peered in, seen and smelled the food, but judged it to be too strange—you wouldn't know what to order, and you worry that everything that comes to the table will be challenging and maybe unpalatable. One night a friend suggests trying it. You consider what you normally prefer—Indian, Japanese, new American—and nearly decline the invitation. But then something ignites in you as you reconsider the new cuisine; you have some insight that modifies your will. You don't forget about your values, preferences, desires, and so on, but their weight or import diminishes, and the invitation now seems worth taking up.

What changed? What insight did you have? Schiller thinks that two things happened. You became attuned to elements of *the aesthetic value of the new cuisine*—its unique or intriguing aroma, its striking visual presentation, its interesting contrast with what's familiar—in a way that *ignited something in you*: your willingness to explore, be adventurous, in short, your volitional openness. Schiller's thought is that the aesthetic value of the new cuisine, which you catch glimpses of through its aroma, presentation, and contrast, consists in its capacity to release you from the constraints of your normal sense of self. And it does this because it enacts your sensible and rational capacities in an unconstrained way. Instead of being dominated by your typical gustatory preferences or ways of understanding cuisine, when you respond to the aesthetic value of the new cuisine, your sense and form drives explore it on its own terms. As your sense drive draws you to the new cuisine, your reason seeks to understand it as it is. Indeed, these activities mutually support one another: as reason openly understands the new cuisine, it exposes the sense drive to new sensible features that it can openly pursue, and as the sense drives uncovers new features, it provides reason new opportunities for understanding. When you play with the aesthetic value of the new cuisine, you thus find your sensible and rational capacities in a state of harmony and mutual support. And, according to Schiller, when you are in this harmonious state, your will is in a less constrained state. In the harmony of play, you are open to ways of engaging that you were not prior to becoming sensitive to the new cuisine's aesthetic value. And it is in this state that you find yourself open to taking up the invitation and actually trying the new cuisine. Schiller's great insight is that aesthetic value in general should be conceived along these lines, in terms of the power of certain objects and properties to cause a state of volitional openness in this way.

### **Letter 27 (pp. 171-178)**

In the very last letter, *Letter 27*, Schiller connects his theory of beauty and aesthetic freedom to social and political life, claiming that "Though it may be his needs that drive man into society and reason that implants within him the principles of social behavior, beauty alone can confer upon him a *social character*. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it fosters harmony in the individual." (p. 176) His thought is that it is only when *individuals are whole in themselves*—only when their autonomy is tempered by aesthetic freedom—that they can be truly sociable and engage with other people as human beings. Schiller thinks

that we tend to stereotype others, identify them with their profession or job, or treat them as sources of entertainment or distraction. But for Schiller the best form of sociability is when people engage with each other *as human beings*—i.e. as capable of both autonomy *and* aesthetic freedom. To do this, we have to treat others as capable of aesthetic freedom, and we *ourselves* have to ‘shine’ with our own humanity. When everyone is doing this well, Schiller we can realize a higher state of political organization, where people are governed by the aesthetic law *bestow freedom by means of freedom*. In this state, “we find that ideal of equality fulfilled” because people are “free alike of the compulsion to infringe the freedom of others in order to assert their own [freedom], as of the necessity to shed their dignity in order to manifest grace.” (p.178)