LIFE AS ART:
CONCERNING SOME PARADOXES OF AN ETHICAL CONCEPT

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During the last thirty years or so, there has been a veritable renaissance of the classical ethical idea of the 'art of living'. Far from being restricted to philosophical discourse, it has also successfully entered the arena of popular culture. This renaissance is closely linked to the late work of Foucault, in which he attempts to restore this classical idea, which he thinks is lacking in modern Western societies. The author aims to assess the Foucaultdian idea of the art of living, and argues that Foucault greatly transformed the Graeco-Roman idea by radicalizing the dimension of artistic activity. In the second part of the paper the author asks whether this radicalized idea can live up to Foucault's own emancipatory expectations. Lastly, the author argues that the radicalization of the aesthetic dimension has a contradictory effect.

Leben als Kunst. Zu einigen Paradoxa eines ethischen Konzepts

In den rund letzten zwanzig Jahren ist es zu einer wahrhaften Renaissance des antiken Ideals der „Lebenskunst" gekommen. Bei weitem nicht auf den philosophischen Diskurs beschränkt, hat es auch in der Populärkultur Platz gegriffen. Diese Renaissance ist eng an das Spätwerk Foucaults gebunden, in dem der Autor diese Idee der Antike aufgrund der Annahme wieder zu beleben versucht, sie fehle den westlichen Gesellschaften. In diesem Artikel versuche ich, Foucaults ethische Idee einer „Lebenskunst" kritisch zu hinterfragen. Ich argumentiere, dass Foucault die griechisch-römische Idee der „Lebenskunst" großzügig abändert, indem er den Aspekt künstlerischer Betätigung radikalisiert (I). Der zweite Teil untersucht, ob diese radikalisierte Idee den emanzipatorischen Erwartungen gerecht werden kann, die Foucault selbst in sie setzt (II). Und schließlich bin ich der Ansicht, dass die Radikalisierung der ästhetischen Dimension einen gegenteiligen Effekt hat (III).

In the past few decades we have witnessed the renaissance and popularization of the ancient Greek term 'the art of life' in popular culture.[1] Shakti Gawain's bestselling self-help manual *Creative Visualization* (1979) was one of the earliest to formulate explicitly the idea of life as art and its positive therapeutic consequences. 'I like to think of myself as an artist, and my life is my greatest work of art', she said.[2] Similarly, in his recent work *Your Life as Art*, Robert Fritz describes the art-like shaping of life as a sort of therapy of the dynamics of the 'life-building' process.[3] In the philosophical debate, the revival of the concept of the art of living is connected with a change occurring in the last three

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[1]   For a discussion of the idea of artistic self-creation in self-help literature, see Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[2]   Shakti Gawain, *Creative Visualization* (1978; rep. New York: Bantam, 1985), 123.

[3]   Robert Fritz, *Your Life as Art* (Newfane, VT: Newfane Press, 2003).

decades.[4] Elizabeth Anscombe's paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy' (1958) marks a turning point in the way of conceptualizing normative theories.[5] Basically, she criticizes the pre-occupation of modern moral philosophy with a law-based conception of ethics, which is formulated in terms of obligation and duty. In her view the approach to ethics relying on universal principles (Mill's utilitarianism and Kant's deontology) results in a rigid moral code unsuited to modern, secular society. Instead, she calls for a return to Aristotelian ideas of the good life. This marked a revival of normative ethics after which modern ethics focused on a descriptive method on the one hand and on meta-ethics dealing with a linguistic and conceptual analysis of concepts like the 'good' on the other.[6] Engaging with the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, the contract-ethics of John Rawls, and recent utilitarianism, authors like Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum again pose the classical Aristotelian question of the good life.

The discourse on the art of living is connected to the discussion about the good life, looking for a plausible answer to the question: How should I live? Although thematically connected, 'life as art' represents a different approach to ethics, drawing on Nietzsche's and Foucault's more radical conceptions of ethics based on aesthetic principles. This paper intends to assess this contemporary Foucauldian ethical idea of 'life as art'. The first part of the paper outlines a transformation in Foucault's late work, particularly his Baudelairian interpretation of Graeco-Roman 'art of living'. In this conception, art no longer stands for 'knowing how' in the original, Aristotelian sense, but for a particular form of artistic activity, which seeks to shape life according to aesthetic criteria, going beyond the border between life and art. The second part of the paper critically evaluates this transformation, examining whether the idea of 'aesthetics as ethics' has the capacity to live up to Foucault's emancipatory expectations. The third part argues that the totalization of the aesthetic dimension paradoxically results in the loss of its corrective force.

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[4]   John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the Good Life: Reason and the Passions in Greek, Cartesian and Psychoanalytic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Martha Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Martin Seel, 'Die Wiederkehr der Ethik des guten Lebens', *Merkur* 45 (1991).

[5]   Elizabeth Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', *Philosophy* 33 (1958).

[6]   Joep Dohmen, 'Philosophers on the "Art of Living"', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4 (2003); Holmer Steinfath, 'Einführung: Die Thematik des guten Lebens in der gegenwärtigen philosophischen Diskussion', in *Was ist ein gutes Leben? Philosophische Reflexionen*, ed. Holmer Steinfath (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998).

I. THE STOICS, NIETZSCHE, AND FOUCAULT

I.1. TOWARD THE AESTHETIZATION OF THE 'ART OF LIVING'

The renaissance of the idea of the art of living is closely connected to the late work of Foucault. After the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), and inspired by his teacher and friend the historian Pierre Hadot, Foucault attempted to restore this classical idea, which he thinks is lacking in modern Western societies.

> What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something that is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?[7]

This marks a decisive ethical turn in the late work of Foucault, which for many seemed to drift away from his previous preoccupations with power, though Foucault insists that it was the subject, not power, that formed the general theme of his research.[8] Replacing a rather deterministic concept of power allowed Foucault to turn to the self in a different way. The self was now no longer considered the passive product of a coercive external force, but the potential agent of its self-formation. In trying to outline the self's potential for self-formation and liberty, Foucault turned to the ancient Greek and Graeco-Roman practice of 'care of the self', describing the self-constitution of ethical subjects. Techniques of the 'care of the self' are for Foucault adequate means for a 'struggle against the forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity'.[9] Self-creation means a 'refusal of the self', which of course only refers to imposed aspects of the self – otherwise the subject would be negating itself.[10]

Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' focuses on the process of aesthetic self-formation, considering it ethical to the extent to which it maintains the freedom of the subject. Foucault identifies this potential in Greek practice, but also in nineteenth-century dandyism (as conceived by Baudelaire),[11] and in

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[7]   Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 350.

[8]   Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (London: The Harvester Press, 1986); Benda Hofmeyr, 'The Power Not to Be (What We Are): The Politics and Ethics of Self-Creation in Foucault', *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 3 (2006).

[9]   Foucault, 'Subject and Power', 213.

[10]   Hofmeyr, 'Power Not to Be', 216.

[11]   Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 11; Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', in *Foucault Reader*.

contemporary gay lifestyles: 'Being gay does not imply any identification with the psychological features and the visible masks of the homosexual, but an aspiration to select and develop a life style.'[12] In these examples Foucault traces the convergence of an active freedom and the breaking open of fixed identities and power relations. It is an aesthetic self-creation, in which, without any premeditated plan, without any fixed truths or rules, one tries to turn one's life into a work of art by mastering the self. This is appropriate to his idea that the aesthetics of existence cannot be put in terms of a final result, but must be viewed as an eternally changing process. Foucault's refusal to give a more detailed description of the concept of stylization paralleled his opinion that since the subject is not given in advance, it has to create itself as a work of art. Regarding the ethical concern about one's own existence, only aesthetic values should be applied. To the absence of morality 'corresponds, must correspond, the search for aesthetics of existence'.[13] The recognition that there is no authentic given self leads him to the practical consequence that 'we have to create ourselves as a work of art'.[14]

I.2. THE TOTALIZATION OF THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION

Having presented the main points of Foucault's concept, I shall now proceed to elaborate on his totalization of the aesthetic dimension, by showing how his concept differs from (a) classical and (b) Nietzschean approaches.

(a) As Pierre Hadot, Foucault's friend and critic, pointed out, Foucault's aesthetics of existence bears little similarity to the Graeco-Roman concepts he examines in *The Use of Pleasure* (1984). The Greeks aspired to a way of life that had aesthetic value, primarily for the person himself, but also for others or for posterity.[15] Besides, a person also had to be able to adhere to certain rules and regulations while demonstrating self-mastery. The classical 'art of life' sought to integrate eudaemonistic conceptions into the social situation of the polis and the care and mastery of the self were completed by virtue.[16]

Hadot specifically mentions that Foucault's conception of self is quite different from the Stoic conception of self. The Stoics did not find joy in the self,

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[12]   Michel Foucault, 'De l'amitié comme mode de vie: Entretien avec Michel Foucault', by R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet and J. Le Bitoux, *Gai Pied*, no. 25 (1981), 38–9.

[13]   Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence', in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 49.

[14]   Foucault, 'Genealogy of Ethics', 351.

[15]   Marli Huijer, 'The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 25 (1999).

[16]   Wolfgang Kersting, 'Einleitung: Die Gegenwart der Lebenskunst', in *Kritik der Lebenskunst*, eds Wolfgang Kersting and Claus Langbehn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 23.

but, as Seneca says, 'in the best part of the self' and the best part of the self is ultimately a transcendent self. Seneca does not find joy just in Seneca, but by transcending Seneca, by discovering that he has a reason in himself which is a part of the universal reason and cosmos.[17] Similarly, Nussbaum points out that by using Stoic spiritual exercises as examples for his aesthetic idea of self-fashioning, Foucault fails to do justice to the connection between the cultivation of the self and the exercise of reason, which served as an important part of these forms of practice. Foucault's 'emphasis on habits and *techniques de soi* too often obscures […] the dignity of reason'.[18] Both Nussbaum and Hadot argue that Foucault cannot legitimately claim descent from ancient sources, because his aesthetics of existence is 'too aesthetic' and represents a 'new form of dandyism, a late twentieth century version'.[19] In fact we find passages in the work of Foucault where he does not differentiate between the art of life and dandyism:

> We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society, that the principal work of art which one has to take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one's existence […] We find this in the Renaissance […] and yet again in nineteenth-century dandyism, but those were only episodes.[20]

In a recent study Timothy O'Leary similarly emphasizes Foucault's imposition of Baudelaire's aestheticism on a Stoic philosophical concept, in which the aesthetic dimension had a much less significant role, far from being the goal of these practices.[21] It seems that Foucault's avoidance of the transcendent self and the bracketing of the dimension of virtue – clearly directed against a Kantian deontology – leads to an ethical concept that is purely aesthetic. This movement also means that life – against Stoic thought – is conceptualized as the raw material of artistic *poiesis*, without an intrinsic *telos*. This omission leads to the idea of an arbitrary artistic stylization, but it remains unclear how this process can be justified. Charles Taylor points to a weak spot in Foucault's argumentation: if the self is not somehow given, then what justifies Foucault's normative verdict that we have to create ourselves as a work of art?[22] Similarly, Richard Shusterman questions the logical adequacy of this statement: if the

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[17]   Pierre Hadot, 'Reflections on the Notion of the "Cultivation of the Self"', in *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, ed. Timothy J. Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992).
[18]   Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 353–4.
[19]   Hadot, 'Reflections', 230.
[20]   Foucault, 'Genealogy of Ethics', 362.
[21]   Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2002), 14–15, 102–4, 172.
[22]   Charles Taylor, 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David C. Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

lack of the essence of human nature necessarily precludes a particular ethical approach, then that is precisely why it cannot imply this particular (aesthetical) ethical approach.[23]

(b) It is quite obvious that Foucault's elaboration of the 'aesthetics of existence' owes a considerable debt to Nietzsche. But Foucault's aesthetic Modernist conception of self-fashioning is not just the continuation of Nietzsche's project, as has often been pointed out.[24] As Michael Ure shows, Nietzsche subscribes more to the Hellenistic and Stoic idea of philosophical therapy than to aesthetic Modernism.[25] In addition to his undoubtedly aesthetic approach to ethics, Nietzsche also conceptualizes his philosophy as a therapeutic attempt to cure his own soul:

> Just as a physician places his patient in a wholly strange environment so that he may be removed from his entire 'hitherto', from his cares, his friends, letters, duties, stupidities and torments of memory and learn to reach out with new hands and senses to new nourishment, a new sun, a new future, so I as physician and patient in one compelled myself to an opposite and unexplored clime of the soul.[26]

Confronted with the inescapable contingency of the world and 'the curse in the nature of things',[27] art emerges to rescue one from despair: 'Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal.'[28] So the aesthetical perspective on life establishes the lacking unity of life[29] and, consequently, the self's work on itself is more therapeutic than aesthetic. The artistic-aesthetic dimension of both the Stoic and the Nietzschean 'art of life' is subordinated to a therapeutic task, not only aiming at healing the loss of the wholeness of the world, but also to be understood as attempts to overcome the social and psychological pathologies that stem from the loss of narcissistic wholeness and omnipotence. [30]

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23   Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), Chapter 9.
24   Martin Jay, 'The Morals of Genealogy: Or Is There a Post-Structuralist Ethics?', *The Cambridge Review* 110 (1989).
25   Michael Ure, 'Senecan Moods: Foucault and Nietzsche on the Art of the Self', *Foucault Studies*, no. 4 (2007).
26   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), Preface, § 5.
27   Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.
28   Ibid., 40.
29   Isak Winkel Holm, 'Konstruktive ästhetische Rechtfertigung: Überlegungen zu einem "anzüglichen" Satz in der "Geburt der Tragödie"', *Text & Kontext* 23 (2001): 90.
30   Ure, 'Senecan Moods', 26.

Foucault's Baudelairian recasting of a merely aesthetic self-fashioning, oriented towards the 'aesthetic' achievement of an original 'personal' style suppresses the fundamental therapeutic dimension central to Nietzschean and Stoic thought. The unobstructed and everlasting self-invention and self-transformation that Foucault proposes lacks the therapeutic dimension. Ironically, from the Stoic and Nietzschean perspective (or at least that of Nietzsche's middle works), this aesthetically oriented ethical concept would be tantamount to a symptom of the very pathology that the classical art of life intended to treat.

II. LIBERATION?

Even though the connection between the concept of the 'aesthetics of existence' and Graeco-Roman or Nietzschean ideas seems problematic, the question still remains: Can this form of aesthetically based ethics live up to Foucault's emancipatory claim? Do the aesthetics of existence really lead to the rejection of coercive subjectivity? In my view the answer is negative and in the following I will support this claim with arguments drawing on the recent work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello.[31]

If we place this idea of aesthetics of existence in the contemporary economic context, it does not seem to contradict the 'new spirit of capitalism', cogently depicted by the two authors. Combining a theory of capitalism with the sociology of critique they point out how critique and justification are intertwined. Capitalism is conceived here, in Weberian fashion, as fundamentally amoral, meaning that it cannot be solely predicated on what it is able to offer (the capacity for accumulation). It needs external justifications, a spirit, to ensure people's commitment to it – capitalism needs its critiques to provide the moral foundations it lacks. The capacity to absorb criticism is constitutive of capitalism because there is 'no ideology, however radical its principles and formulations, that has not eventually proved open to assimilation'.[32] For Boltanski and Chiapello two forms of critique have accompanied the history of capitalism: the 'artistic critique' reacting to inauthenticity, massification, and standardization, and the 'social critique', which emphasizes inequality and egoism. The artistic critique has flourished in the past thirty years, its values (expressive creativity, individuality, fluid identity, and self-development) were held up against the constraints of bureaucratic discipline and consumer conformity. The result was a new spirit emerging in the late 1980s. New approaches like flexible labour systems,

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31   Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).
32   Ibid., xv.

team-work, multi-tasking, and 'flat' management – also called, in short, 'post-Fordism' – were responses to demands implicit in the artistic critique, incorporating them in a fashion that both renders them compatible with accumulation and simultaneously disarms their potentially subversive powers. Boltanski and Chiapello depict the new moral framework of this emergent order and its new, nomadic ideal subject. Whereas in the 1960s, management discourse still emphasized the pursuit of objective qualifications and stable careers, in the last fifteen years new virtues have been stressed: flexibility, continuous retraining, and self-realization at work. The new figure of the 'connectionist man' working in capitalist networks shares few features with the 'solid' individual, who is the 'malleable product of a "labour of self-fashioning"'.[33]

Considered in the terminology of Boltanski and Chiapello, Foucault's critique that is immanent in the concept of the 'aesthetic of existence' runs parallel with the 'artistic' critique of capitalism, defending the values of expressive creativity, fluid identity, autonomy, and self-development against the constraints of discipline and conformity. But according to this framing of contemporary capitalism – where the border between labour and the labour of self-fashioning seems blurred – it is hard to see how the concept of 'aesthetic ethics' would provide opposition. Rather, it seems that the concept makes life intelligible as a sort of production. Aristotle points out that 'production (*poiesis*) and action (*praxis*) differ in kind […] Life is action not production'.[34] *Praxis* designates the realm of human action, while *poiesis* stands for the realm of productive activity. In the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle is more explicit: 'Now production has an end other than itself, but action does not […] [Rather] action is itself an end'.[35] Accordingly production realizes itself as activity only by making some product. So, rather ironically, the artistic self-fashioning aiming at opposing the Tayloristic disciplining effects of power and economy, turns out to reverse the Aristotelian idea, thinking of life no longer as mainly *praxi*s, but as a *poiesis* – a process of production which the subject controls from the outside. This reversion does not seem to contradict the 'enterprising culture' described by Nikolas Rose. He identifies social programmes and technologies which aim to sustain an ethic based on the individual crafting of a lifestyle. Individuals are incited to work on themselves as if they were working on a project, 'to develop

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33   Thomas M. Kemple, 'Spirits of Late Capitalism', *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (2007): 153.

34   Aristotle, *The Politics* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), 32.

35   Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Works of Aristotle*, 2nd ed., vol. 10, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 1140b.

a "style" of living'.[36] At the same time, work is reconceptualized and innovation is assured by aligning organizational objectives with the self-fashioning desires of the self.[37] With Rose we argue that the ethics of self-fashioning is another, though less disciplinary, way of tying individuals to their selfhood through their crafting of a lifestyle.

On the basis of the two framings of contemporary capitalism and culture, the idea of 'life as art' seems not to provide a critical standpoint. On the subject of the absent opposition one would paraphrase Adorno questioning the subversive force of individuality. He notes that the quest for individuality is ambivalent: on the one hand it stands for the emancipatory struggle, on the other hand 'it is also a consequence of the mechanisms from which mankind must be emancipated'.[38] Following Adorno, one could maintain that the aesthetically created individual difference stands in no opposition to the 'whole': 'Conversely, all that is opposed to the whole because of its individuality remains a permanent feature of existence.'[39] Rather the ethical idea of aesthetic self-fashioning actually retains some striking affinities to the ideals of the 'new spirit of capitalism' and the 'enterprising culture'.

III. THE TOTALIZATION AND WEAKENING OF THE AESTHETIC

Now I turn to the third part of the paper, (a) examining why ethics cannot and should not be completely based on aesthetics; and (b) pointing out some problems of this productivist approach, maintaining that the totalization of aesthetics paradoxically prevents it from fulfilling its ethical role.

(a) The idea of *bios* (life) as material for an aesthetic piece of art, which Foucault explicitly refers to, leads to a fundamental terminological problem. It leads to the idea that one can relate to oneself as to an external, objectively given material that one should give form to.[40] To grasp self-relation in these terms means that the unobjectifiable, performative dimension is not taken into account. In other words, life, while lived, has no material – it is lived material. There is no outside place which is not part of the material of life, no place from which the work of constructing could be done. Applying the idea of aesthetic

[36] Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 157.
[37] Ibid., 160.
[38] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1969), 241.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Martin Saar, 'Der Stoff des Lebens (oder: Wenn das Leben ein Kunstwerk ist, wieso ist dann meines keins?): Präliminarien zu einer Kritik der Lebenskunst', *Verstärker* 4 (1999), http://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/verstaerker/vs004/.

forging would assume a distance between material and artist, which is not the case here. The conduct of life is a performative process in Austin's sense, meaning that the material of life cannot be separated from its execution. It is thus misleading to conceptualize *bios* as the material for a work of art. The fact that one can change the course of one's life does not mean that one can create it as a work of art. Understanding the self requires taking into account the constitutively opaque character of the self-relation.

(b) What is the ethical relevance of aesthetics? Aesthetics deals with a specific kind of perception.[41] It is not an exclusively cognitive and instrumental attitude, but an affective and imaginative one, with its own value and oriented towards its performance. It is performative in a double sense: it is attentive to the object for its own sake and at the same time to the process of the perceptive attention put towards the object. It focuses on the object in a non-instrumental way, while focusing on the performance of perception. This double attentiveness has its end in itself, and the interdependence of these two kinds of perceptive attention is constitutive of aesthetic perception.[42] At this point we may begin to grasp the individual-ethical relevance of aesthetic *praxis* – it concerns forms and types of action which we engage with for their own sake, and processes that have their end in themselves and are thus related to experiences of the individual good. Shusterman draws attention to this point: 'Aesthetic considerations are or should be crucial and ultimately perhaps paramount in determining how we choose to lead or shape our lives and how we assess what a good life is.'[43] To a certain extent the ability to define the individual parameters of a good life – in a pre-moral sense – depends on knowing one's way in these types of actions, and involves self-knowledge. In another sense aesthetics is also a moral matter, because it has a role in defining the individual good, and because the main function of morality is to secure protection for the conditions for the individual good. Moral philosophy must presuppose a formal term of the good to be able to define what fairness is about – as Nussbaum convincingly points out.[44] With Rawls we would state: 'justice draws the limit, the good shows the point.'[45]

The obvious relevance of aesthetics to ethics, however, neither leads to the conclusion that aesthetics alone is able to determine the parameters of the

[41] Frank Sibley, 'Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic', *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965).
[42] Martin Seel, *Ethisch-ästhetische Studien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996).
[43] Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 237.
[44] Martha Nussbaum, 'Nature, Function and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Supplement (1988).
[45] John Rawls, 'The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 17 (1988): 251.

individual good nor that aesthetics can supersede ethics. The first claim does not even include all kinds of action and relations that have their end in themselves but are not entirely aesthetic. Love is a good example here: it may be put in aesthetic terms, though it is not held together by aesthetic affinity alone but by moral orientations like loyalty and trust. For the second claim: knowing one's way in actions and relations that have their end in themselves, without including instrumentally oriented action, seems insufficient for defining the individual good. Besides these points an aesthetic approach to ethics completely lacks the social dimension of recognition. We can therefore say that aesthetics may play an important part in defining the individual good, but aesthetics as ethics would be enormously one-sided and would disregard a fundamental difference between the ethic and aesthetic perspectives.

In conclusion, concepts of 'life as art' akin to Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' attack the idea that morality can and should be given an essential role in personal identity. This is a valuable intuition, which productively ties in to the recent discussion on the good life, but it leads to the far too drastic conclusion that life should be thought of as art. I have argued that this 'totalization' of aesthetics actually renders it harmless in the face of the modern imperatives of self-fashioning and that it prevents it from fulfilling one of its roles – namely, to be a guiding force concerning the individual good and a corrective force in relation to moral orientation.

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