

## Why Man Needs Art<sup>1</sup>

David Kelley & William Thomas

*This is a lightly edited excerpt from Chapter 4 of The Logical Structure of Objectivism, by William Thomas and David Kelley.*

Art is widely thought of as indefinable, inherently subjective, and disconnected from any practical need or concern. Many modern thinkers say art is any form of expression, if one wants it to be. Traditional thinkers often connected art with the creation or expression of beauty, which they saw as an eternal, otherworldly verity, like Plato's forms. Ayn Rand rejected both these theories. In their place she offered a clearly defined conception of art, and argued that art was intimately connected with man's need to rely on reason in the service of his life in this world.

Ayn Rand held that a work of art embodies a viewpoint—a content or theme—about issues much broader than the specific concretes involved, issues such as man's nature and place in the world. This content is what the artwork represents at its deepest level, and it is what the artist is trying to convey in creating and shaping his material. Art thus "involves man's widest abstractions." As examples of the issues that art is concerned with, Rand mentioned the following:

**Is the universe intelligible to man, or unintelligible and unknowable? Can man find happiness on earth, or is he doomed to frustration and despair? Does man have the power of choice. . . or is he the helpless plaything of forces beyond his control, which determine his fate? Is man, by nature, to be valued as good, or to be despised as evil? These are metaphysical questions, but the answers determine the kind of ethics men will accept and practice. (Ayn Rand, "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," *The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 19.)**

She described the answers that an artist gives to these questions as "metaphysical value judgments," and she characterized art accordingly as "the selective recreation of reality in accordance with the artist's metaphysical value-judgments." (Ayn Rand, "Art and Cognition," *The Romantic Manifesto*, p.45.)

What does it mean to "recreate" reality? In many cases, of course, art involves invented people, scenes, and events. But Rand's term applies primarily to the abstract content of the artwork. The artist conveys a view of reality that is selective, a view of reality that highlights what the artist considers interesting, striking, important, essential, typical, or ideal. The artist represents the world, not as it is in every respect, as a journalist or historian would report it, but "as it might and ought to be." Thus the artwork is a concrete embodiment of the artist's philosophy, and the viewer or listener responds to it as such. If the philosophical ideas implicit in the work are congruent with our own, we tend to feel a sense of recognition and affirmation that we experience as profoundly meaningful. It is the portrayal of a world fundamentally re-envisioned that gives great art much of its power.

This power, according to Objectivism, reflects a need of man's consciousness, a need that derives from man's need for philosophy. The connection between these needs is laid out in the diagram at right.

Premise 1 states: Man needs philosophy. A philosophical understanding of the values that make for a full life, and of the principles we should follow to achieve such values (that is, the

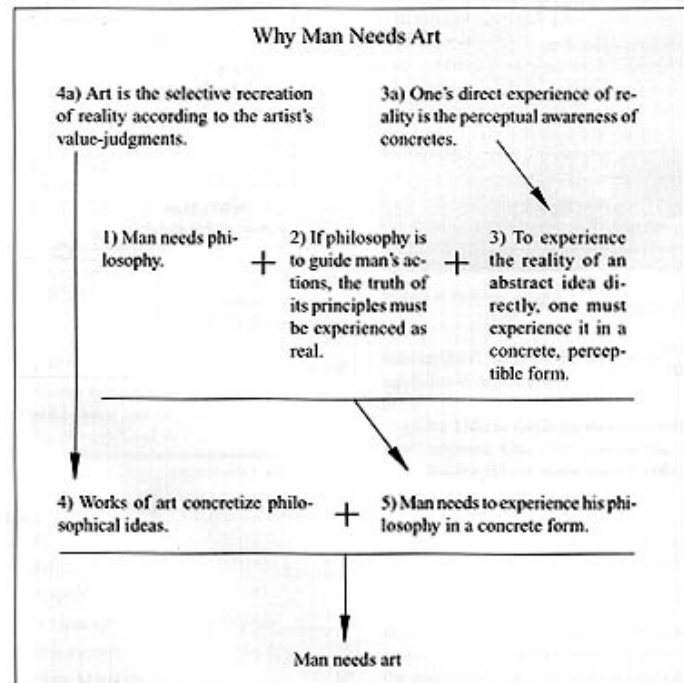
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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.objectivistcenter.org/articles/wthomas\\_why-man-needs-art.asp](http://www.objectivistcenter.org/articles/wthomas_why-man-needs-art.asp)

virtues), is necessary if we are to choose our actions wisely. Philosophy, in other words, must guide our actions. But it can do so only if one experiences philosophical convictions not merely as ideas or notions but as facts. A person who sees a truck racing down a city street takes the presence of the truck and its power to harm him as facts, as immediate realities, and he automatically refrains from stepping into the street. But if a person is in the hazy transition between sleeping and waking, caught between a vivid dream and the emerging but still dim awareness of the quiet bedroom, he is not yet ready to act on any of the confused contents of his awareness. In the same way, a person who grasps his own life as an ultimate value, who accepts the moral propriety of pursuing his own self-interest and understands that principle in the full context of his nature as a living being, is not likely to engage in self-sacrifice. But if he holds this moral principle as a vague or tentative hypothesis, a mere opinion as opposed to a fact, it will not have the same power to motivate. In other words: If a philosophy is to guide man's actions, the meaning of its principles must be experienced as real. This is Premise 2 on the diagram.

But one's fullest experience of reality is the perceptual awareness of concretes (Premise 3a). Our basic form of awareness is the sensory perception of concrete particulars. A philosophy is a system of abstract ideas. Abstractions as such do not exist out in the world, and one does not encounter justice or injustice, for instance, except in the particulars that are instances of them, such as the proceedings in a court of law or the character of a given individual. As abstractions, philosophical ideas embrace a wide range of particulars by omitting the details of their referents, while in perception we are aware of those details in all their complexity. By contrast with the wealth of information in a single visual scene, an abstraction can seem thin and unengaging. Of course we could in principle give a full conceptual description of anything we perceive. In the case of philosophy, we could in principle give an extensive conceptual description of what a good person would seek in life and the specific actions he would take to achieve it. But given the enormous number of issues involved, it would take volumes to do so, and the contents of those volumes could not be held in mind simultaneously. Because we have no richer or more direct awareness of the world, the experience of things via perception is what seems most real to us. In the diagram, this inductive premise (Premise 3a) gives us grounds to infer Premise 3: To experience fully the reality of an abstract idea, one must experience it in a concrete, perceptible form. From the information summarized in Premises 1, 2, and 3, with the addition of the straightforward fact that a philosophy is an abstract idea, we can deductively infer Premise 5: Man needs to experience his philosophy in a concrete form. As Ayn Rand expressed the argument,

An exhaustive philosophical treatise defining moral values, with a long list of virtues to be practiced, will not [communicate normative abstractions adequately]; it will not convey what an ideal



man would be like and how he would act: no mind can deal with so immense a sum of abstractions. . . . There is no way to integrate such a sum without projecting an actual human figure—an integrated concretization that illuminates the theory and makes it intelligible. (Rand, "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," p. 21.)

Now we can see how art fits into human needs. Since the making of art involves the representation and embodiment of values, it is straightforward to conclude that: Works of art concretize philosophical ideas. This is Premise 4. In the most profound and distinctive art these ideas are, as Rand noted, fundamental judgments that capture important philosophical issues. In a novel, we can see these judgments in the essential nature of the characters and the moral choices they make. A novelist in presenting a scene also performs in words the judgment that a painter or sculptor employs: in choosing to present a figure in a certain light, in choosing significant symbols, in highlighting some features and obscuring others, he communicates a sense of what is important, fascinating, worthy of regard. Even such stylized art forms as music and dance involve using the media of sound and motion to present an emotion-like sense of the world and of life.

Premises 4 and 5 together give us the Conclusion: Man needs art.

Now let us consider what kind of direct, empirical evidence exists for our conclusion. We need to consider such evidence not only to confirm the conclusion but to complete the reasoning for it. The fact that we need to concretize our philosophical abstractions, together with the fact that art can perform this function, does not yet constitute a proof. There are, after all, other ways of concretizing ideas.

One can see ideas embodied in historical accounts, including biographies of great people. The stories of George Washington crossing the Delaware and Winston Churchill during the Battle of Britain are examples of courage that can inspire us in our own lives. Another way of concretizing ideas, one widely employed by religions, is ritual or ceremony. The act of burial, for example, concretizes the fact that the deceased no longer exists in our world, and a gravestone serves as concrete reminder of a life that has passed.

What kind of inductive evidence is there that art is the best way, or at least an important way, that we can fulfill this need? We can introspect on the role of art in our own lives and on how much we feel we need it. Then there is anthropological evidence: Art—and indeed all the traditional forms of art, including story-telling, poetry and song; music and dance; drawing and sculpture—exist in every human culture. And there is economic evidence, too: the amount of money people spend to acquire and experience art.

From this evidence, we can infer (given the conclusion of the diagram) that art is an extremely important value. Notice that we could not infer this without the argument in the diagram. The mere fact of art's ubiquity is not necessarily proof of its value. Mystical religions are ubiquitous as well, for example, and we would have to examine the nature of religion to understand why it is common. (In fact, in its most useful aspects, it is a form of philosophy, and purports to make the world intelligible to people.) But since we can show why art is needed and observe that it is widely prized and produced, we have every grounds for esteeming it as a value.

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