



What have the arts to do with ethics?

Description

Ethics checklists, committees, codes of practice and approvals came late to the arts. The place of ethics in the practical arts and their study looks like an afterthought, as if peripheral to the act of creation. After all, art has to begin at least with the freedom to say and do what you want. The ethical may come later to rein it in. I'm prepared to concede that the *bureaucratisation* of ethics is secondary to the conduct of the arts, but the substance of ethics is central.

The word *ethos* provides a clue. What is the research ethos of your college, department, team, discipline or practice? The [etymological online dictionary](#) describes ethos: "ethos revived by Palgrave in 1851 from Gk. ethos "moral character, nature, disposition, habit, custom"! An important concept in Aristotle (e.g. "Rhetoric" II xii-xiv)."•

The way that you do it

Ethics is about character, and relationships within communities, and the way you do things. In our book on *Interpretation in Architecture*, Adrian Snodgrass identified ethics with the issue of *phronesis*, which was the word Aristotle used for "practical reasonableness," judgement, and prudence.

"Phronesis is an understanding of what to do when placed in a particular, concrete situation. It is the faculty that comes into play when we make judgments about what action is to be taken when confronted with the necessity to act. Most importantly for what follows, it is inseparable from **ethics** and from our involvements in a society. *Phronesis* has an inherently **ethical** aspect, since the making of judgments concerning courses of action entail consequences that bear upon the welfare, the well-being, the good life of ourselves and others"• (112).

Snodgrass then argued that this is the character of the design studio. The artist's studio, the lab, the music rehearsal, are all sites of practical reason and ethics. Former PhD student Leonidas Koutsoumpos also picked up on the theme as he studied the ethical dimension of the music rehearsal space, the design studio and the martial arts *dojo*.

Critical ethics

Thereâ??s a second ethical strand in the arts, and this for me is best represented by the political and social discourses of neo-marxism and its variants. Karl Marx said

â??â?! crime must not be punished in the individual, but the anti-social source of crime must be destroyed, and each man must be given social scope for the vital manifestation of his being. If man is shaped by his surroundings, his surroundings must be made human. If man is social by nature, he will develop his true nature only in society, and the power of his nature must be measured not by the power of separate individuals but by the power of societyâ?• (154).

In tones more strident than anything penned by Aristotle, this passage encapsulates for me the critical political agenda within the arts. Thereâ??s a sense in which, insofar as we identify ethical wrongdoing, particularly amongst those with less power, we are all complicit. This makes sense if we follow Marx in believing society has been corrupted by capitalism. Much more could be said, but neo-marxist critical theory has been highly influential in many corners of the arts â?? further evidence of the ubiquity of ethics.



These are some of my reflections prior to a class on research ethics, in which case studies loom large.

[Arts-based Research Ethics Case Studies](#)

Here are the slides: [Ethics1](#).

References

- Koutsoumpos, Leonidas. 2005. Morality versus ethics as an architectural problematic, *Working Paper*. Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh.
- Koutsoumpos, L., *Inhabiting Ethics: Educational Praxis in the Design Studio, the Music Class and the Dojo (PhD Thesis)*, Edinburgh: The University of Edinburgh, 2008.
- Marx, Karl. 1977. The holy family. In D. McClellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*: 131-155. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Snodgrass, Adrian, and Richard Coyne. 2005. *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*. London: Routledge. ISBN 0415384494.

Note

- The image is of a critical sculpture by Andreas Siekmann, called *Trickle Down* on display outside the Modern Art Museum in Salzburg, Austria (2007). It's a critique of the way public space becomes a commodity. See Museum [site](#).
- Thanks Ailie, Roxana, Daniel, Thomas and Katie for a great discussion.
- On the question of moral relativism see post: [The eye of the beholder](#).

Category

1. Research related

Tags

1. Aristotle
2. ethics
3. phronesis

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