

HUMAN BEING TRANSCENDING ITSELF: CREATIVE PROCESS IN ART AS A MODEL OF OUR RELATION TO THE ULTIMATE REALITY

ERICH MISTRÍK

Abstract: The paper reviews some of the links between the notion of “ultimate reality” and everyday life, mainly art, beauty, the creative processes in art, and citizenship. If, according to M. Heidegger, art reveals the truth of being (i.e., also of ultimate reality), then we may find some historical descriptions of creative processes that are very close to descriptions of ultimate reality. Three examples of these kinds of descriptions are discussed (Abhinavagupta, St. Augustine, F. Engels). The final aim is to show how the interpretation of ultimate reality can contribute to a better understanding of the creative process in art. These considerations can also throw light on one particular aspect of civil life—the relations between everyday life and its final goals. If we are to gain an understanding of the relations between ultimate reality, art and civil life, then the disciplines of aesthetics, philosophy, history and anthropology, and cultural history should all contribute together.

Keywords: ultimate reality, art, creative process, aesthetics, civil life.

In this paper I will reveal aspects of ultimate reality that are often neglected but that are still important to any individual who wants to understand the meaning of his/her life. The notion of ultimate reality appears in religions, but its content cannot be reduced to religious aspects alone. It often plays a role in non-religious traditions too and in everyday civic life as well.

I use here T. Horvath’s definition of ultimate reality: ultimate reality is “that, to which the human mind reduces and relates everything, that which does not reduce to anything else” (cited by Gbadegesin 1991, 1). It is the final aim of every human activity. Some people use it as the ultimate normative in their everyday lives. For the purposes of this paper, I will employ the notion of “ultimate reality” for any kind of ultimate reality that has appeared in human history: the Christian God, Hindu Brahma, Chinese Tao, Hegel’s Geist, civic Liberty, etc. They act as ultimate goals and as ultimate standards and/or norms for human activity. All of them possess moral value. All of them bring epistemological consequences for women and men and some of them possess deep ontological value. When thinking of ultimate reality, people often use ideas borrowed from different fields of human activity, e.g., from religion, philosophy, mythology, and even from logic. The use of aesthetics or art criticism in theorizing ultimate reality and in thinking about civic life has mostly been neglected. Why?

Philosophers and religious thinkers think of art and beauty as something too sensuous to be connected with ultimate reality. Aestheticians, art critics, and artists do not consider problems of ultimate reality useful in the analysis of the structure of artwork, of aesthetic values, or of imagination. Scholars theorising on citizenship consider ultimate reality as something that is not connected to everyday life and to civic virtues. I propose to consider these ideas as misunderstandings. Beauty and art, religion, the human senses, civil life, and transcendental experiences are products of the same being—a human being; all of them belong to the human way of life, all of them are part of a culture and of a society. This is the main reason why I consider that the connections between ultimate reality and beauty, art and citizenship are valuable. Thinking about these connections enables us to show the ways in which people have thought about ultimate reality. This way of thinking also gives us an idea of how an “ordinary” citizen relates to the ultimate goals of his/her life.

In this article I shall first present the general ideas on these topics then I will consider a few historical examples that illustrate my idea. Finally, I will describe how all of this relates to the human creative processes—art being the best model for human’s creative processes. I shall therefore frequently direct the reader’s attention to the creative process in art. The other goal of this article is to show how aesthetics and art criticism are closely connected to thinking on citizenship.

The human being transcending him/herself

Ordinary people living in an empirical reality are usually not fully satisfied in this reality. Such people do not feel free in their earthly life because they feel incapable of realising all human forces and abilities. People have minds that are able to understand much more than this earthly life alone. The mind enables people to overcome empirical reality, to project a variety of things and activities, or, in fantasy, to ignore the world and to build a new one. Frequently, people’s abilities stem from pictures that are elaborated in fantasy. These pictures help people to overcome or change empirical reality. Human goal-directed activity promotes those changes. Consequently, people do not change the biosphere alone but create a new sphere on Earth—culture.

Thus, through activity, humanity has been transcending its strictly limited mortal and everyday existence; human beings transcend their own empirical beings and become in some sense “immortal” because their lives continue in the ideas embodied in the surrounding world. People wish increasingly to transcend mortal and empirical existence and continuously seek new ways of transcending the self but are mostly unsatisfied.

A specific set of activity ends at the very moment a person has found something that cannot be transcended. It is something that in principle cannot be transcended by an individual person at all, and people usually call it “ultimate reality.” Since human beings are not able to transcend this ultimate reality, they believe that their activity has come to an end. The moment people encounter this ultimate reality, they are able to say: “Here is Something that I cannot transcend!” They can feel It, they can experience It, but they can never reach It physically or transcend It.

When a person understands and/or feels ultimate reality, that person stops the activity. This is the moment when one understands one’s own limits across all the senses and abilities.

This is the moment when that person has found the ultimate goal of the activity. By an ultimate goal I mean the limits of every action. An ultimate goal suggests that there are standards indicating what is permitted and what is not permitted. It suggests something that gives general direction to a person's activity.¹

People wishing to transcend themselves experience a confrontation between themselves and ultimate reality. From this moment on, the human mind does not need to spend all day looking for ultimate reality. Since ultimate reality can then work as a basic standard for all the following days, ruling over every further act and perhaps over every further thought as well. It often works this way on a subconscious level.

What is the role of beauty and the creative process in art if we take into account the interactions between human activity (or civic activity) and ultimate reality? Let us briefly look at the specific character of the creative process in art. The following is based on Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*. I turned to Heidegger to answer this question and have modified his ideas only slightly, specifically in moving the basis of art from Heidegger's "being" to my "human being".

The creative process in art is an immanent part of human existence, that is, of the human being, and it embodies all the characteristic features of that existence. But art is not simply a reprint of human existence; it interferes fundamentally in human existence. Creative processes in art reveal the truth of a human being: "Art then is the becoming and happening of truth" (Heidegger 1984, 284). If human existence were without art, it would be empty, with no fresh feelings, reflected only in science, philosophy, or moral standards. In that case, the inner sense of human existence that is evidenced by human feelings may remain concealed from the person. We would be able to experience only our own individual existence but not the existence of humanity as a whole in its variety of troubles or joys. But with the help of art, we experience human existence replete with its own senses and human feelings. The inner sense of human existence is revealed to a person by art. Through art an individual person's experiences are transformed into pictures of imagination first and then into the structure of an artwork. Any particular piece of art represents a multitude of human experiences—transferring them from age to age, from place to place. This kind of transfer enables us to see, to read, and to feel the actual experiences of people from different races, cultures, and times. This is why art is not simply a reprint of a human being; it intervenes with the human being.

The goals of any particular creative process may vary—from conjuring up something (for example, Palaeolithic shaman), through making an item embodying ideal beauty (artists of the seventeenth century), to representing a visual impression (the impressionists) or happenings. The main scope of all of this is to uncover the truth of a human being, of human existence. In this way art collectively embodies all discrepancies, all triumphs, and all the downfalls of humanity.

If we say that art uncovers the truth of a human being, then we can take the next step: the idea that the creative process in art, the process of uncovering the truth of a human being,

¹ Every human activity may have its ultimate reality, to which it is unceasingly compared, and ultimate reality may be in the background of all human activity. In this sense, ultimate reality functions as the final goal of human activity.

is an expression of a human being's path to ultimate reality. When an artist is looking for beauty through the creative process, the artist expresses a variety of human feelings and human destinies. These are closely connected to what is considered ultimate reality by humanity.

This is the main idea of my paper. Aesthetics and art criticism have elaborated numerous methods for understanding artworks. Both these humanities describe the creative processes in art across different ages and different cultures. They may also describe the theoretical reflections of art. Such description enables us to show the ways people have thought about ultimate reality in their history, the ways people have understood ultimate reality, and the ways in which citizens daily encounter the ultimate limits of their activities. In producing this description aesthetics could co-operate with philosophical, historical, and anthropological studies of ultimate reality. Thus we could build a more solid history of cultural changes.

The context of my main idea is three-fold: 1. It is useful to study ultimate reality with the help of aesthetics (or the help of art history or art criticism). 2. The study of ultimate reality can help in better understanding the creative process in art. 3. This type of ruminations can throw light on one aspect of civil life—the relations of everyday life and its final goals.

Creative process in art and our path to ultimate reality

Let us examine some of the historical descriptions of the creative processes. These descriptions will serve as illustrations for the main topic of this paper. In the third part of the paper I shall present some more arguments on the connections between ultimate reality and beauty, between art and citizenship.

We might begin our analysis of the creative process with one of the greatest Indian aestheticians, Abhinavagupta (born around 960 AD). According to Abhinavagupta, who wrote in harmony with old Hindu tradition, the creative process was not simply the result of working with colours, sounds, poetic figures, or dramatic techniques. He considered this kind of work simply to be the last phase of the creative process. The phase in which the artist elaborated the inner image of an object, or an idea, was considered to be the most important element in all the creative processes. It was the inner image that should be expressed in artwork. While colours, shapes, figures, and techniques only stimulated the sensual perception, the creative process was about imagination. Therefore, the first duty of an artist was not to stimulate sensual perception but to create an image in the artist's mind. From this perspective, what has evolved in India then is "a highly specialised technique of vision" (Coomaraswami 1956, 5). On the other hand, theories describing the artist's physical work have not developed, nor have descriptions of the process of incorporating an image into artwork. This last process was not important for Abhinavagupta for he viewed it as a matter of sensual perception, full of hedonism and, consequently, without truly aesthetic meaning.

Making an inner image of a thing had a strong determined goal. An artist began work by invoking the gods which would help the artist. Then the artist had to concentrate on the object or idea which was to be represented or expressed. This concentration represented a highly emotional state of mind. The concentration imparted should be such that creating an image would be similar to a trance or an inner vision of an object (or idea). Kanti

Chandra Pandey interprets Abhinavagupta's ideas on the creative process as follows: "Emotion at a high pitch makes the emotively affected person completely forget himself. It de-individualises the individual. It frees him from those elements which constitute his individuality. It raises him to the level of the universal" (Pandey 1985, 62). This trance was considered the highest peak of creative process in ancient India. From the trance the physical embodiment of the artwork could begin.

This was the reason imagination was not considered to be a specific mental faculty by Abhinavagupta, but it was considered to be the artist's inner force and skill. It was "the power of having mental images" (Coomaraswami 1956, 175) (literary or visual or auditory images). Techniques of creative process in ancient India, as Abhinavagupta expressed it, were close to yoga practice and to meditation techniques. Young artists in India were obliged to acquire the secrets of yoga first. Then they were considered capable of creating artworks. Creating artworks was no different to other means of achieving good, self-perfection, and supreme wisdom. Here we come to the gist of the matter: the creative processes copied the basic means of finding individual and inner perfection as they were used in various forms of Hinduism. All the methods used were based on developing inner perfection with the help of concentration and meditation techniques, of proper diet, positive thinking, and proper physical exercises; "bodily and verbal actions being", as Sangarakshita put it, "the extensions of mental states" (Sangarakshita 1987, 24). Creating beauty, i.e., the creative processes in art in ancient India were simple models of Hindu ways of reaching ultimate reality. For example inner psychic development leading to a person's perfection and to attaining unity with Brahma began with concentration techniques and with improving the person's mental abilities. These activities were also to be found in the creative processes. Both groups of phenomena (in life or in art) were guided by the same rules. Both ended in trance. Both contained the very synthesis of wisdom, good, enlightenment, and self-perfection. In both processes a human being transcended the self in the same way. Here, the creative processes shed light on religious goals (in this case Hindu), and the reverse is also true: religious beliefs shed light on art. Art and religion formed and used the ultimate goals of human activity.

European thinking is different. From ancient Greece onward, Europeans have been seeking a separate way to ultimate reality. In Hindu India, the way to ultimate reality was (and still is) closely connected with the ways to beauty and wisdom. In Europe, especially in modern times, increasingly strict distinctions are made between the many goals of human life. An independent path to beauty is sought, a different path to good, and a completely distinct path to ultimate reality. Europeans do not care for the incontestable inner relations of all human and super-human values. Their lives have been atomised into many separate goals. Reaching ultimate reality and understanding it are isolated from everyday goals and actions.

I will illustrate my general idea in the context of European differentiation between the goals of human activity. I will describe two different figures in European history and two different points of views on the creative process in art. Let us first examine St. Augustine (354-430 AD).

God is the only real beauty for St. Augustine. The beauty of God is immortal and the deepest of all beauties in the whole universe. We do like the beauty of the world, but it would be better if we liked only the beauty of God. The beauties of our earthly world are only traces of God's presence within the world.

Given this view of beauty what does an artist do during the creative process? St. Augustine's solution was that art imitates reality; it imitates the beauties of our earthly world. However, an artist is only able to imitate traces of God's presence. An artist is not capable of representing God. God is the absolute being and thus cannot be represented exactly. Only pictures of God can be represented, only acts of God can be represented, only traces of God's presence can be represented. The highest being is God; our world is created by God. Consequently, the world does not have its own existence, only an existence derived from God. Thus, when we look at the world we can only see lower levels of reality. The artist cannot reach God in any way, using any of the artist's skills or abilities, since an artist is only able to imitate these lower levels, therefore only illusion can be created. An artist imitates and at the same time creates an illusion.

God is still beautiful, wise, good, and in our lives we can see traces of God's wisdom, as well as traces of God's goodness. An artist can only discover the traces of God's beauty. Beauty is separate from the different values of human life in the artist's creative process, although all of them remain living in unity in God.

What does all of this mean? (1) In Augustinian art theory, a human being was not capable of reaching Beauty or of reaching ultimate reality (namely, reaching God). A person's abilities could not surpass the borders of the earthly world and of everyday life. An insurmountable gap existed between God (true Beauty) and the human world (traces of God's presence). (2) In Augustinian art theory, the path of medieval women and men to ultimate reality (seeking God) was separated from other human values. A human being could understand ultimate reality only during special services aimed at ultimate reality (at God).

The second, completely different, figure from European history that I discuss is Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). For him, the problems of the creative process were quite simple. The beauty of art is based on truth. What is truth? It is historical truth, the truth of historical and social development. Historical development encompasses social relations of people, their economic activities and their individual characters formed by society. Chiefly, historical truth encompasses the changes in human activity caused by the economy. The only duty of an artist is to represent this historical truth, to make "truthful reproduction of typical characters in typical circumstances" (Engels 1888/1998, 763). Engels viewed the creative process in art as the representation of the main trends in historical developments of the human species.

Tibor Horvath's definition of ultimate reality ("that, to which the human mind reduces and relates everything, that which does not reduce to anything else," cited by Gbadegesin 1991) will shed light on the way in which Engels understood the creative process. The historical development of the human species was ultimate reality for Engels. Nothing greater existed. Economic development was the basis to which Engels reduced all human values, all human activity, and all human feelings. This is a specific kind of ultimate reality because it is not transcendental, although it remains quite mystical. To reach this ultimate reality a human being has first to understand the historical development of the human species and then to change the present circumstances.

The goals of the creative processes in art as understood by Engels lie in representing economic development, in reaching historical truth. Engels' specific ultimate reality was historical development, the truth of history. From this it follows that Engels considered that

the means of creating artwork was the same as that involved in reaching this ultimate reality: every human activity had to end in fostering economic and social development.

In various cultures, understanding ultimate reality was understood to be identical to understanding the creative processes in art. We saw this from the ideas of three historical figures, Abhinavagupta, St. Augustine and F. Engels; for all three of them, the creative process in art developed in the same way and reached the same goals as everyday human activity did—the ultimate limits were the same. Now, we are able to use the knowledge of the creative process in art as a model. This model can describe the methods people of different ages and cultures used for reaching ultimate reality. Why is this so? Which characteristics of the creative process enable us to make such comparisons? Why did people think of the creative process in the same way as they thought about their paths to ultimate reality? I will suggest answers to these questions in the third part of this paper.

Creative process and religious experience

The answer to these questions can be found in a particular phase of the creative process in art. This process fills the artist's consciousness with an object (idea) to be represented or expressed in a work of art. How is this process carried out?

In everyday life, an artist's consciousness works as the consciousness of an ordinary human being; it is passive, and inert, and reacts routinely and automatically to external impulses. Reality is seen as an ordinary complex of colours, shapes, movements, smells, etc. Consciousness works routinely as superficial knowledge of phenomena. In one moment the artist's consciousness latches on to an object (idea) which is to be represented or expressed in a future work of art. The result is double-sided: an artist "fills up" with an object and reflects himself/herself as a subject (ideas based on Husserl 1972). Natural and routine attitudes become reflection. But consciousness does not fill up with superficial sides of the object (idea) only. In reflecting on the object, the inner model of the object is developing inside the consciousness. This inner model does not carry external and insubstantial qualities of the object; it develops a variety of meanings which the object is able to carry for the subject, for the artist. An artist is not only a passive bearer of the model, but an active co-producer of the model because the meanings of the object are developed from subject-object relations. Under these circumstances, the creative process in art begins. Consciousness has lost its inertness; it is active and gradually fills up with the qualities and meanings of the object (idea).

Now, the most important phase of the creative process begins, i.e., inspiration, sometimes called artistic intuition. Inspiration comes from the "intimate fusion of mind and reality" (Radhakrishnan, cited by Mampura 1988, p. 331). An artist does not know where it comes from, for it usually strikes like lightning. It comes as a reaction of the whole artistic mind. It highlights those features of the object which are central to the artist's consciousness that is being filled in at that moment. Consciousness is aware of the unity of itself and the features of the object (of the idea). I (the artist) am the object (the idea); the object (idea) is me because the object has in Lukács' words, a "completely anthropomorphic character" (Lukács 1981, 480). An artist (human being) has thus transcended herself or himself.

This feeling of unity is reached only in the highest and the most truthful art. It can be reached only in the greatest moments of an artist's life when mastery is at its peak. Artistic

inspiration (intuition) works on the highest level of the artist's consciousness when the artist is undergoing the deepest of experiences. Many artists describe this kind of inspiration as approximating a trance.

The processes described work in the same way as religious revelation, when the seer experiences unity with God, the absolute. A trance cannot be reached in ordinary commonplace religious feelings but only when the seer "substitutes for the mixed and doubtful religious motive a spiritual aspiration, vision, interpreting experience" (Sri Aurobindo 1984, 133): in the deepest experience of faith where the highest religious inspiration comes, in which differences between the subject (seer) and the object (God) are lost. The subject is filled up with God, with the absolute. The seer is God, God is inside the seer. The anthropomorphic principle drags God into the subject in order to unite the subject with God and to enable God to penetrate the subject (seer).

We can see the same process in artistic inspiration: an artist is "filled" with the object (idea); through the object the artist sees and experiences him/herself and the world around. In religious revelation, the seer is filled up with God; through God the seer sees and experiences her/himself and the world. Artistic inspiration and religious revelation develop in the same way. They differ only in the content of this unity: there is an object (idea) in one and God (the absolute, ultimate reality) in the other.

In civic life, citizens and liberty work in the same way. People acting as independent and responsible citizens "fill" themselves with liberty if they are to act for the common good but still independently. They feel as if they have been penetrated by liberty and through that liberty they apprehend world. The citizens become the personification of Liberty. The citizens are fully penetrated by liberty and inspired by the ethos of liberty seeing it as the final goal and the final limit of human activity—seeing liberty as Liberty, as a sort of ultimate reality. They are inspired by this Liberty.

Even the notion of inspiration has its religious roots, which bring it much closer to religious revelation than is commonly known. In the Book of Job (32.8) inspiration means an extra mental quality of a human being, that is breathed into it by God. According to the Bible this extra quality enables a person to understand the world around them properly. We can go further: in the aesthetic theory of Greek antiquity, inner ecstasy (also called trance), was necessary for the creative process. The old Greek notion of enthusiasm (inspiration) meant a state in which an artist was filled with God. Plato's notion of poetic inspiration meant that poets were "inspired and possessed" (Plato 1984, 51). He also suggested that "the gift which you possess of speaking excellently about Homer is not art, but, as I was just saying, an inspiration: there is a divinity moving you" (*ibid.*, 50).

In concluding the third part of my paper I can say that revelation and inspiration take place in the same way; their mental bases are analogical. Both work as unities of a subject and an object. Both are discoveries of an object for a subject and a subject for her/himself with the help of an object. In both, the human being transcends itself. The difference between them is in content only: religious revelation is the synthesis of the finite and infinite, artistic inspiration is the synthesis of an individual subject with earthly human reality, a citizen's activity is the penetration of the individual person with ultimate Liberty.

Conclusion

Cultures of humanity change from nation to nation and from time to time. Epochs and nations have elaborated specific notions and images of ultimate reality. It is not easy to analyse images of ultimate reality in distant societies. With the help of a knowledge of the creative processes in art which were used in those societies, we can better reconstruct the image of ultimate reality and the ways in which individual personalities in different societies relate themselves to that notion, i.e., to the final goal of their activities.

We should not forget that art is one of the most important parts of culture. It forms culture, it expresses cultural standards, it expresses the feelings of human beings, and it carries the emotional secrets of women and men. No analysis of a culture could be complete without an analysis of its art. The idea of ultimate reality and the images of ultimate reality are crucial parts of human culture as well. Art and ultimate reality together with other parts of cultures such as language, customs, the law, and others form a common system. We cannot understand any of them without understanding the others. Let us conclude with L. Wittgenstein (1983, 8): "To describe a set of aesthetic rules fully means to describe the culture of a period". To describe an image of ultimate reality fully means to describe the culture of a period. We can do it with the great help of the description of the creative processes in art. We should be aware of the complex character of the creative processes.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of beauty in relation to ultimate reality is only a one-sided interpretation. It is not a complex one. Use of this kind of description is limited to considering ultimate reality as part of a specific culture system. Aesthetics is not able to help with specifying ultimate reality in its deepest quality—in the sacred character of ultimate reality. Nor can a theory of citizenship grasp ultimate reality in its sacred character. Still, aesthetics can give us a far greater understanding of different societies.²

References

- Coomaraswami, A. K. (1956). *The Transformation of Nature in Art*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Engels, F. (1888/1998). Letter to Margaret Harkness. In Ch.Harrison, P. Wood, J. Gaiger (Eds.). *Art in Theory 1815-1900. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford: Blackwell, 763-764.
- Gbadegesin, O. (1991). Presenting This Issue. *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 14.1.
- Heidegger, M. (1984). The Origin of the Work of Art. In S.D. Ross (Ed.). *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Husserl, E. (1972). *Križe evropských věd a transcendentální fenomenologie*. Prague: Academia.
- Lukács, G. (1981). *Die Eigenart des Aesthetischen*. Vol. 1. Berlin-Weimar: Aufbau Verlag.
- Mampra, T. (1988). Religious Experience and Revelation. *Journal of Dharma*, 13.
- Pandey, K. Ch. (1985). *Abhinavagupta. Cultural Leaders of India: Aestheticians*. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
- Plato (1984). "Ion," *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*. In S. D. Ross (Ed.). Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Sangarakshita (1987). *A Survey of Buddhism*. London: Tharpa Publications.

² The paper has been written with the support of VEGA research grant No. 2/0116/09 "Philosophical Thought and Aesthetic Perception in the Context of Everyday Life".

Sri Aurobindo (1984). *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
Wittgenstein, L. (1983). *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*. In C. Barrett (Ed.). Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Civics and Ethics Education Department,
Faculty of Education,
Comenius University,
Račianska 59,
813 34 Bratislava,
Slovakia
E-mail: erich@erichmistik.sk