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Good Work and Aesthetic Education: William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Beyond

JEFFREY PETTS

A notion of “good work,” derived from William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement but also part of a wider tradition in philosophy (associated with pragmatism and Everyday Aesthetics) understanding the *global* significance of, and opportunities for, aesthetic experience, grounds both art making and appreciation in the organization of labor generally. Only good work, which can be characterized as “authentic” or as unalienated conditions of production and reception, allows the arts to thrive. While Arts and Crafts sometimes promotes a limited aesthetic (both theoretically and stylistically) around handicraft, a good-work aesthetic theory encompasses a broader range of working methods and materials without compromising the core Arts and Crafts “authenticity” principles of control over production and creative autonomy. Moreover, it gives weight to the equally important role of spectators by linking their aesthetic education to good work in their working lives and, in turn, to the success of artworks. The theory delivers insights into the nature of *works* as collaborative projects and the developmental courses, participatory and esoteric, open to the arts generally; and it is a robust counter to anti-aestheticism and intellectualism in the theory and practice of the arts.

I

William Morris and the artist-craftsmen and -women of the Arts and Crafts Movement have a *theory* of art and the aesthetic that has an importance beyond their own artistic work and its achievements. Morris delivered lectures on the arts in many British towns and cities in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s; these were published as *Hopes and Fears for Art* and later as a volume

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of his collected works.¹ The movement codified and publicized its practices through various societies and organizations like the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society and Charles Ashbee's Guild and School of Handicraft, each producing its own literature, which ranged from practical handbooks to political exhortations. Later, William Lethaby's lectures, often to organizations that were part of the movement, were published as *Form in Civilisation*.² To that extent, then, a Morrisian or Arts and Crafts aesthetic theory has to be constructed from sources that were necessarily rhetorical, as well as being practical and theoretic. Morris and Lethaby were explicitly aiming to influence current artistic practice through their lectures to audiences usually composed of artists, architects, civic leaders, and so on (and this no doubt at least partly accounts for their neglect in philosophical aesthetics). Still, I will argue that this reconstructed theory is sufficiently coherent and sophisticated to be worth investigating for its relevance to contemporary debates in analytic aesthetics, particularly against those arguing for art as a nonaesthetic activity (of which the seminal text remains Arthur Danto's "The Artworld"), and for its arguments for art's connections (as an activity of both making and experiencing artworks) with other life experiences.³ In these respects, then, in the history of aesthetics it is a forerunner of, or at least has intellectual associations with, pragmatist aesthetics (yet it is often unacknowledged within that paradigm, so neither Dewey's *Art as Experience* nor the more recent pragmatist works by Richard Shusterman cite Morris) and shares ground associated with the Everyday Aesthetics movement.⁴

In arguing for the theoretic and historic significance of a Morrisian aesthetic, I take encouragement and a lead from Paul Guyer's recent acknowledgement of the neglect of Morris in accounts of the history of philosophical aesthetics. Guyer names Morris, along with Schiller, Ruskin, and Dewey, as properly understanding the full significance of the distinctive character of aesthetic experience. As Guyer writes, they understood

that aesthetic experience is distinctive in its freedom from our most immediate obsessions with purpose and utility, but that the freedom it thereby allows us is not a freedom for the simple contemplation of beauty with no further concerns or implications, but rather a freedom to develop our imaginative and cognitive capacities, to gain knowledge of ourselves and others, and to imagine new ways of life, a freedom that is valued not simply for its own sake but also because of the benefits the developments of these capacities can bring to the rest of our lives.⁵

Guyer recognizes two related and pivotal Morrisian issues: an art-life nexus; and aesthetic experience understood as a "developmental" rather than simply "contemplative" experience, one that extends beyond the experience of fine art. The key to these, I will argue, is a notion of "art as good work," and it is this that places Morris in the company Guyer cites while also explaining

the “full significance” all those identified by Guyer give to aesthetic experience (although I focus discussion here on the Morrisian theory of art and the aesthetic and the emergent good-work thesis). It is worth noting, too, that attention to these themes places Morris as a key figure in *Everyday Aesthetics*, which is similarly premised on the aesthetic experience of nonart objects and events and the rejection of “art versus craft” and “fine versus popular art” distinctions. Yet *Everyday Aesthetics* duly recognizes Dewey as a founding father but not Morris.⁶

In citing Morris alongside John Ruskin, Guyer of course notes a well-recorded intellectual association. Morris’s and the Arts and Crafts Movement’s indebtedness to Ruskin is variously and often acknowledged. Morris, in his one brief attempt at autobiography, notes reading Ruskin was a kind of “revelation.”⁷ He read the chapter “On the Nature of Gothic” in *The Stones of Venice* as “the truest and most eloquent words that can possibly be said.”⁸ I take this as a further explanation of Morris’s and Arts and Crafts’ philosophical neglect—in short, it is perhaps rather too easy to see Ruskin’s aesthetics as the definitive exposition of Arts and Crafts philosophy, so that an understanding of Ruskin is sufficient for an intellectual assessment of Morris and Arts and Crafts. Again, however, there is something more to an Arts and Crafts philosophical aesthetics than Ruskin’s moral and theological aesthetics. This, I will argue, becomes evident from investigation of the historic debate that took place within the Arts and Crafts Movement about the legitimate role of machines in artistic production. Reference to this debate introduces broader social and psychological considerations of artistic “control” and “autonomy” essential to authentic good work. Still, it is proper to an understanding of Morris’s and Arts and Crafts’ aesthetics to begin at least with one aspect of Ruskin’s analysis of art and society that stays at the root of the good-work thesis—namely, the division of labor and men.

II

Adam Smith observed that “the division of labour . . . occasions, in every art, a proportionable increase of the productive powers of labour” and famously gave the example of pin production divided between workers so that “one draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it,” and so on.⁹ He additionally asserted that the division of labor is “carried furthest in those countries which enjoy the highest degree of industry and improvement,” thus suggesting its moral advantage, too.

Ruskin denied any such moral advantage to the division of labor; indeed, “we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided, but the men; —Divided into mere segments of men . . . so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin. . . . we manufacture everything there except men.”¹⁰ The sentiments are Marx’s as

well: "the ancient conception, in which man always appears . . . as the aim of production, seems much more exalted than the modern conception, in which production is the aim of man and wealth the aim of production."¹¹ For Ruskin, too, "there is no wealth but life."¹² The division of labor generates alienating conditions of production so that, following Marx's analysis in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts 1844*, work becomes a mere means to existence. In a de-alienated state of affairs, control and creative scope in production are returned to the worker, and "in place of the wealth and poverty of political economy come the rich human being and rich human need."¹³

Stefan Morawski points out that Marx consistently contrasts artistic freedom to alienation (and a similar claim can be made for Ruskin). All non-alienated labor is described as creative, and so the same as artistic labor.¹⁴ A consequence for Marx is that the architect, for example, is invoked as a human *worker*, not a special category called *artist*. In *The German Ideology* Marx writes: "the exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals and its related suppression among the mass of people is a consequence of the division of labour"; and "in a communist society there are no painters, but at most people who among other things also paint."¹⁵ The line of the argument is clear: the division of labor alienates the worker from his essential nature as a free creative worker; in de-alienated conditions, the creativity in work previously associated with a special group called "artists" is open to all, and there are no longer artists as such but a full array of creative workers known by the activity through which their free work is expressed at any one time in their life, be it through building, painting, or, presumably, pin making.

It is reasonable to doubt a literal take on this scenario of a radically "undivided labor" (one in which there are no specialist "artists" at all), but it expresses an important conception of the nature of all human beings as potential artists. G. A. Cohen develops these themes: "why should a man or woman *not* find fulfilment in his or her work as a [specialized] painter . . . what is so bad about a person dedicating himself to one or a small number of lines of activity only?" But then Cohen answers his own doubt: "there is nothing wrong with a division of labour in which each type of work has value."¹⁶ And one would add that such a virtuous division of labor could not extend to the extremes of Smith's pin production, divided as it would be for the production of Ruskinian "life." For how can someone employed solely in "straightening a piece of wire" fully develop their individual abilities? How can that work ever have an aesthetic character, either as an activity or product, and be of anything but economic value?

Morris's acknowledged debt to Ruskin has been noted; Marx, who he read later in life, would have only confirmed for him the good-work thesis directly relating artistic work to de-alienated conditions of production. His description of the prerequisites of "real art" is laid out in such terms:

the providing of a handicraftsman who shall put his own individual intelligence and enthusiasm into the goods he fashions. So far from his labour being "divided," which is the technical phrase for his always doing one minute piece of work . . . ; so far from that, he must know all about the ware he is making and its relation to similar wares. . . . He must be allowed to think of what he is doing, and to vary his work as the circumstances of it vary, and his own moods. . . . He must have a voice. . . . Such a man I should call, not an operative, but a workman. You may call him an artist if you will, for I have been describing the qualities of artists as I know them.¹⁷

Morris's accounts of art are invariably of this type: accounts of artists that are not biographical but rather focus on their general working conditions and qualities of mind. As a consequence of this emphasis on a general mode of production, Morris's theory of art is marked by inclusiveness regarding materials, methods, and styles. Everything made under the right de-alienated conditions of production is beautiful and artful; moreover, "all works of craftsmanship were once beautiful, unwittingly or not" (in an age before the capitalistic division of labor), and so there was no category of "Art" as such.¹⁸ The very act of "making" in de-alienated conditions is to "share in art."¹⁹ It is the case, then, that for Morris this *mode* of production is telling in what is and is not art, rather than art status being marked by specified activities (portrait painting but not furniture making, and so on) or by judgments of taste per se. Art's "vehicles" are provided by all human work, but "what the labourer does in an alienated fashion, at the command of another, deriving neither profit nor benefit to himself from it, the artist does in comparative autonomy."²⁰

As Ruskin had inspired Morris, so the Arts and Crafts Movement's debt to Morris was universally acknowledged. So, for example, John Dando Sedding states that "the one man who above all others has inspired hope and brought life and light into modern manufactures is William Morris."²¹ But the Morrisian theory had to be worked out in practice, and this determined the real extent of its inclusivity. Early Arts and Crafts exhibitions were "broad enough to show machine-made metalwork . . . alongside hand-raised pieces."²² Walter Crane, president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, in 1888 commented on the potential breadth of Arts and Crafts style: "the great advantage of the Morrisian method is that it lends itself to either simplicity or to splendour"—although it must be conceded that his illustration of this breadth betrays Arts and Crafts' medievalism, stretching from "oaken trestle tables" to "walls hung with rich arras tapestry."²³ Still, "work, incessant work, with Beauty for our everlasting aim," urges Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, and with it "the extension of the conception of art."²⁴

Thus, beauty was not ignored for scope; indeed, the key Arts and Crafts driver is that good work has aesthetic consequences. According to Charles Voysey, architect and designer, "it is delightful to see skill of hand and eye.

All evidence of painstaking is a joy to behold."²⁵ Walter Crane, the artist and designer, similarly stated: "Make a man responsible, and give him the credit of his own skill in his work: his self-respect at once increases, and he is stimulated to do his best; he will take a pride and pleasure in his work; it becomes personal and therefore interesting."²⁶ The process or mode of production is everything *because* the process determines *aesthetic* value: products produced in alienating conditions are visibly "less interesting, less human and less alive," according to this theory at least.²⁷

It is to this relation of art to good work that Cobden-Sanderson alludes: "art, as a manifestation of the artistic spirit, has its origin, or, to speak more correctly perhaps, its opportunity in Craft, and Craft in the needs of life." One might rephrase "Its opportunities in Craft" as "its accredited vehicles." But this Craft does not place proscriptions on artistic vehicles and styles: "as the needs of life vary from generation to generation, and from age to age, so must vary the objects [aims] of Craft, and with them the modes of manifestation of the artistic spirit."²⁸ Accredited vehicles and their styles change, in other words, so that Lethaby could hold "if we gathered the children who now dance at street corners into some better dancing-grounds, might we not hope for a new music, a new drama and a new architecture?"²⁹

Cobden-Sanderson and Lethaby confirm the vehicular and stylistic inclusivity of a Morrisian aesthetic theory (which is to comment on something other than Morris's particular style as an artist). There are always new opportunities for art to emerge from the ordinary patterns of life—if activities are carried out in the right "Craft" conditions—and the forms this art will take will necessarily change as humans evolve. But it might be claimed that an unacceptable revisionism of Arts and Crafts has occurred—isn't good work strictly *handicraft* for Morris and his followers? And by this standard, isn't a reasonable account of aesthetic value thereby compromised (for what of the beauty of man-made but not handcrafted work)?

III

Herbert Read once asked "can the machine produce a work of art?"³⁰ The question, asked in the 1930s, has an added resonance now that there is indeed *the* universal machine, the computer, capable of any program. Read's answer was "yes," its truth supposedly evident from the aesthetic appeal of machine-made products that reject ornament (his *Art and Industry* is illustrated with photographs of a broadcasting mast, amplifier bays, coffee machines, taps, kettles, metal chairs, an iron, a washing machine, and the like meant to illustrate the case). He concluded that the Arts and Crafts argument of *Stones of Venice* was lost: (some) machine art is "abstractedly" beautiful—beautiful, that is, without any dependence on the *work of a human hand*. And yet Read ends in some agreement with Ruskin: "the fundamental

factor in all these problems [of art] is a philosophy of life . . . posed in its clearest and unescapable terms by John Ruskin."³¹

The solution to this apparent contradiction is straightforward: it is not only the work of the human hand that is visible in art but of human *design*. In beautiful machine-made objects we still can see the work of the "abstract artist": such an individual controls his labor and tools as much as the craftsman beloved of Ruskin. But for this to happen "the factory must adapt to the artist, not the artists to the factory."³² Read is simply saying that Ruskin is right in locating the problem of art in the broader context of how things are made but that guild handicraft is not necessary for art, that properly artistic modes of production can be expounded around notions like "control" (over tools and processes) and "autonomy" (from the demands of commercial marketing to change a product to meet a perceived demand, for example).

Richard Wollheim notes that a determination of art by such a mode of production "suggests the determination cannot be readily identified with constraint or necessity"³³; and similarly I take it that a formulation of de-alienated labor around notions of control and autonomy, here specified as good work, does not determine artistic vehicles and styles in a way that limits art to a range of handicrafts. Indeed, there is underdetermination: there is no exhaustive list of vehicles, no prescribed list of styles, and so on (there is artistry in industrial products of many kinds, and entirely new products emerge with technological change, for example).

Still, can this good-work thesis be reasonably argued as a development of Morrisian and Arts and Crafts ideas and practices? I believe it can. The matter of the nature of art for Arts and Crafts is essentially about the manner of making: this is not a blanket rejection of "machines" (although their alienating effects are significant when allied to the division of labor) in making but of mechanized and narrow labor processes, which reduce the worker to a machine. It is not even about removing all dull and repetitive tasks from making: Morris, for example, accepts drudgery, if it's the absorbing kind that one knows will produce something of value: "you know too that in any work that one delights in, even the merest drudgery connected with it is delightful too."³⁴ We see that within the Arts and Crafts Movement debate about the use of machines is commonplace but far from universally damning. So, for example, John Sedding, architect and designer, states "let us not be too hard upon the machine, which, after all, has no volition of its own, but is merely a dead passive instrument of mechanism."³⁵ Similarly, Francis Troup, an architect, affirms "if machine tools are legitimately used they form an excellent servant, but there must be no imitation 'handwork' about them."³⁶ Note again that the key is "authenticity," not handicraft per se.

Arts and Crafts traditionally sees a problem for art in allying machines to overspecialization of tasks; additionally, it theorizes the drive to this as com-

mercial capitalism, which also removes artistic autonomy in production. So, according to Morris,

the end proposed by commerce is the creation of a market-demand, and the satisfaction of it when created for the sake of the production of individual profits: whereas the end proposed by art applied to utilities . . . was the satisfaction of genuine spontaneous needs of the public . . . To the commercial producer the actual wares are nothing; their adventures in the market are everything. To the artist the wares are everything.³⁷

Read's insistence on artistic control over factory processes is also evident in Arts and Crafts. Worried that "art" may just be applied at a late stage to products of mass production, with nothing more than a veneer of artistry, Sedding stresses that art is "an integral part of all work, of all manufacture whatsoever."³⁸ In fact, Read's "solution" (the preeminence of artistic design in production) predates him. The following statements are from the 1888 "Objects of the Association" of the National Association for the Advancement of Art and Its Application to Industry: "the adoption of artistic design to modern methods of manufacture," as well as the rehabilitation of craft working; and, in a recognizably modern sentiment of the leaders of developed economies, "it is by excellence of make and superiority of artistic design that the products of manufacture of any country will henceforth attain prestige and command markets."³⁹

There was, it is true, a formal split in the Arts and Crafts Movement in the early twentieth century with the formation of the Design and Industries Association (DIA) by Lethaby and others. The DIA supposedly still operated on Arts and Crafts principles but was argued against by handicraft purists, notably Earnest Gimson, architect and designer, who saw that "excellence in design" was compatible with mass production. He was convinced, therefore, that the producers of art were being taken out of the equation by the DIA through its greater emphasis on producing products that were, for example, easy for the consumer to use about the house, easy to clean, and so forth. But the terms of the debate were still those set by the Arts and Crafts demand for good work; so, therefore, Lethaby remained committed to a "philosophy of right labour"; to "education for fine forms of production"; and to "right doing."⁴⁰ In any case, such a debate about precise production methods is hardly surprising given the underdetermination of art by the notion of good work. Furthermore, it should be noted that the capacity to accommodate such disputes and "new art" is properly understood to be a basic desideratum of any true theory of art.

Yet design must show "life," and since that life is not entirely captured by what Virginia Woolf calls "the nervous tremor which distinguishes the hand-made pot from the machine-made" (Read's case for early twentieth-century

industrial design as art is now pretty much conventional wisdom, and the “story of craft” (includes industrial art), so it is right to question how it is possible for de-alienated labor, or good work, to *show* its authenticity, despite any stipulations that it simply is “more interesting.”⁴¹ Art is a *mode* of production then—indeed for Arts and Crafts “the supreme mode in which human activity of all kinds expresses itself at its highest and best”—but what makes a *work*?⁴²

IV

The argument I am forwarding has thus far been that an Arts and Crafts or Morrisian aesthetic theory is fundamentally one of good work rather than handicraft per se. Handicraft is perhaps best seen, in this light, as emblematic of good work for the Arts and Crafts *Movement* rather than good work’s sole artistic presence. Still, there is a reason to hold to an *Arts and Crafts* good work aesthetic because a further claim is made that proper appreciation of art requires a community of spectators who, like artist-workers, are themselves unalienated workers—*this* work indeed constitutes their aesthetic education.

In the Arts and Crafts Movement the nexus of common good work, of workers “doing things well,” and a culture in which the arts thrive, so that there genuinely are works of art appreciated as such, is often left tacit or implicit. However, one figure at least explicitly states a link between good work and culture—namely, Ananda Coomaraswamy. While outside the movement, Roger Fry makes a very similar case. Coomaraswamy defines culture as “the capacity for immediate and instinctive discrimination between good and bad workmanship, of whatever kind” and argues that the loss of appreciative, discriminatory skills and destruction of handicraft are closely connected: intelligent, chosen labor stimulates thought and awakens the mind to ideas.⁴³ These experiences—of “doing things well”—are necessary for art to thrive, since without them there is no possibility of general public appreciation of art. This is my understanding of Fry’s speculations and conclusions on the best social conditions for art:

when art has been purified of its present unreality by a prolonged contact with the crafts, society would gain a new confidence in its collective artistic judgement, and might even boldly assume the responsibility which at present it knows it is unable to face. It might choose its poets and painters and philosophers and deep investigators, and make of such men and women a new kind of kings.⁴⁴

The sentiment is expressed by Morris, too, as might be expected: “you cannot educate and civilise men without giving them a share in art,” where “art” is understood as good work and surroundings filled with its products⁴⁵—and where daily and common work is “ennobled”—that is, good.

Here, then, for Morris is the “Democracy of Art”: a community of makers and appreciators present throughout society and engaged in good work, with the lesser arts an essential ingredient of everyday work and living, sharpening the appreciative sensibilities through work that gives pleasure in making and using. So Fry, in something of this Arts and Crafts *spirit*, sought to

find work, not as painters but as decorators, for the young English artists who had been drawn together by the Post-Impressionist Exhibition [held at the Grafton Gallery, London in 1910]. It was bad for young artists to be forced to depend upon private patrons who, as the exhibition had convinced him, looked upon art “chiefly as a symbol of social distinction”. He wanted to see the walls of railway stations and restaurants covered with pictures of ordinary life that ordinary people could enjoy.⁴⁶

So reports Virginia Woolf: “Duncan Grant, Frederic Etchells, Bernard Adenay, Albert Rutherston, Max Gill and Roger Fry himself made designs representing Swimmers and Footballers, Punch and Judy, Paddlers in the Serpentine, Animals at the Zoo, and other familiar London scenes” for the walls of the students’ dining room at Borough Polytechnic.⁴⁷ “The greatest art has always been communal, the expression—in highly individualised ways no doubt—of common aspirations and ideals.”⁴⁸

Morris, I think, represents a deeper understanding here; he adds practices to aspirations and ideals shared by a community, realizing that good work is not simply “communal” in this latter sense. Without this addition, aspirations can become mere daydreams or, worse, an attitude of awe, perhaps envy, of an *other world*, something that was never a part of Morris’s understanding. Still, Fry is of interest (in the development of a good work aesthetic theory) because his undoubted Morrisian ideas and sentiments about making in general were held alongside his critical championing of an art form—Post-Impressionism—evidently not in the Arts and Crafts *style*. Fry’s ideas inspired the Omega Workshops, where “young artists were to make chairs and tables, carpets and pots that people liked to look at; that they liked to make.” Moreover, for Fry this artistic craft work allowed non-commercial finer art to develop freely: “thus they were to learn a living; thus they would be free to paint pictures, as poets wrote poetry for pleasure, not for money. Thus they would assert the freedom of art ‘from all trammels and tyrannies.’”⁴⁹

It might seem, in this division of labor, that craft is indeed less than art, or at least different in fundamental respects. But, empirically, there are examples of Omega craft work at the Courtauld and the Victoria and Albert in London; and, so the good work argument goes, this fact represents the common factor in making art, properly called—namely, the joy in creative making and the pleasure this brings to “use,” whether that use is practical (chairs and tables and pots and such like) or imaginative (the pleasures of painting,

poetry, and music, for instance). Good work can accommodate differences between the work of potters and painters; but these are not craft versus art distinctions. Fry gets this: he lauds Cezanne and Matisse, and he encourages young artists to make furniture, textiles, and pottery. He gets, then, the common thread of creative life in a certain mode of making. This good-work mode has many facets: truth to life experiences, not to commercialism or fashion; it is against the “dull and stupidly serious,” but also the modern pseudoartist, the arriviste, determined to arrive and attract attention; and it is for the “spirit of fun,” for naive peasant art even.⁵⁰ In conversation with Edward Elgar, Fry is recorded as saying: “After all, there is only one art; all the arts are the same.”⁵¹ But Fry rightly noted the dangers of pure Arts and Crafts: he mocked an Arts and Crafts deputation to his workshop in 1916 for being sentimental, genteel, and full of sham modesty, mixing “moral feeling with everything.”⁵² So it is said that unlike “William Morris and the designers of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Fry was not concerned with social reform or protesting against contemporary machine manufacture, but wanted to remove what he saw as the false division between the fine and decorative arts.”⁵³

If changing “working methods” was not an explicit aim of Omega, it is still an oversimplification at best and misunderstanding at worst to suggest no connection with the “social reform” and craft agenda of Arts and Crafts. Fry’s speculations on the best social conditions for art have been noted, and I have been suggesting that these do segue with the fundamental Arts and Crafts tenet of good work. And Fry *was* a reformer in his work with Omega after all, both in inspiring its methods (such as anonymity of works) and its venturing into the potentially wide market available for furniture and wares (stuff that could replace the kind of pseudo-art that he so deplored in railway refreshment rooms and other public places). More significantly, addressing the division in the arts between “fine” and “decorative” was to effectively address the social issue behind aesthetic appreciation (in England in 1912, but generalizable across cultures) that this kind of experience could not be ordinarily expected. This was the case even in the presence of “great works,” especially new ones like the works of the Post-Impressionists in Fry’s time, when so much of ordinary “work” in society was completely without artistry. No doubt Fry disliked Ruskin’s extreme moralism about art, wondering, for instance, how it could be possible that every stone of Venice is morally good. Yet extreme it is, and not the essence of the good-work thesis, that can consistently argue an aesthetic theory without any Ruskinian moral reductionism (although one cannot of course deny the moral *implications* of good work). Fry’s significance is in registering a Morrisian Arts and Crafts aesthetic theory without recourse to Ruskinian and purist Arts and Crafts ideologies, and in recognizing that there is an “art-life” link in both making and appreciating *at large*—in ordinary places of

work, in homes, in everyday public places, as well as exhibition spaces. Of course, within the Arts and Crafts Movement it remained a basic understanding that art proper only survives by—indeed is evidenced by—such a wide, public involvement with the arts. Thus, for example, it is thematic in Lethaby's *Form in Civilisation*.

V

Morris recognizes the apparent “strangeness” of the claim that life properly lived is essentially artful, especially in a state of affairs where art is only “exhibited”:

You cannot imagine your daily life, still less your daily work, having anything to do with art: somebody else paints a picture which he hopes a rich man will buy, but scarcely dares to hope anybody but a few artists like himself will understand; you look at it, heed more or less what the newspapers say about it.⁵⁴

This “problem” is further characterized for Morris by the way artworks are commonly presented; for him, even the existence of exhibition catalogues signifies that there is something wrong with the ordinary population of spectators that they should need this “education”—as if an artwork is being translated “from a foreign tongue into our own.”⁵⁵ Although it seems strange to demand artful lives, the real “strange” state of affairs for Morris is that there are two separate groups: artists with “special gifts,” and a mass of people who don’t understand works until they are explained to them. It is “strange” because “it seems to me that the sense of beauty in the external world, of interest in the life of man as a drama, and the desire of communicating this sense of beauty and interest to our fellows is or ought to be an essential part of the humanity of man, and that any man or set of men lacking that sense are less than men.”⁵⁶

The proper state of affairs would involve everyone being able to exercise this “gift” of sensing beauty in the world both in making and appreciating, “sometimes actively as a worker, sometimes as a looker-on.”⁵⁷ Instead, according to Morris, the condition of the two classes of rich and poor means the rich “annex” artists, and “what wonder that they [artists] can no longer talk a language understood by the people.” Art exhibitions just say “you can’t understand this because you’re workers, but they are beautiful.”⁵⁸

At best, exhibitions are said to offer a “hopeful invitation” and suggest to the ordinary spectator that they have the potential to work and produce in a like manner. But the Morrisian argument runs more deeply and broadly: a properly sensitive audience would not need the exhibition catalogue to understand the artwork, would no longer be patronized or educated; instead, it would be genuinely enjoying a shared experience of the “beauty of life” and of a life experienced by all. Indeed, there would be no exclusive

exhibition sites of beauty as such because beauty would be in the workplace and the home. All of this concurs with the good work theory.

The Morrisian understanding of aesthetic appreciation is thus built on ideas of “collaboration” and “community,” which in turn are founded on an aesthetic education achieved through authentic work. Morris thought it once the case, before the “divorce between art and common life” that took hold with industrial capitalism, that artistic appreciation was not a specialist activity confined to a privileged few. But it does not matter whether we agree about the real existence of such a golden age of what might be called easy, unmediated (by exhibition catalogues and the like) appreciation, nor whether, for that matter, we simply *care* about (have a sociopolitical interest in) expanding the audience for art. The *theory*, rather, argues for a notion of good work as the basis of appreciation, such that the appreciative audience could not “have existed but for the constant unconscious education which was going on . . . by means of the ordinary work of ordinary handicraftsmen.”⁵⁹ In essence, Morrisian theory argues that the fine arts *depend* on a significant part of working life amongst the population at large being carried on with “art,” and this art must be conceived around a notion of good work that itself draws on general descriptions of craft work for inspiration and example. “The beauty and manliness of daily life,” as Morris calls it, is “the very sustenance of and wellspring” of all the arts.⁶⁰

This art-work nexus potentially goes beyond a claim about “art and craft” (in a purist Arts and Crafts sense), suggesting a broader understanding of “craft” than handicraft activities only. It also presents more than a simple one-directional “art and life” analysis, which might understand the benefits of artistic or good work to other activities as solely residual, something like our turning away from a discrete “art experience” to reconsider a related life experience. The stronger claim is that good work is needed to create a culture: that is, it generates the very conditions in which the arts thrive, through supplying both art workers *and* appreciators, and therefore the conditions of production and reception necessary for *works*. The contention is that the means of artistic production are paralleled by equally important means of reception and that both share the structures common to good work. Appreciations without the qualities of good work are like being told how to get a work—the spectator merely following orders, what Dewey called “judicial” appreciation—or are merely personal felt impressions about a work involving no critical appraisal. In both instances the critical *but felt* component of appreciation is removed—that ability to truly get a work oneself, which is essential to the axiology and phenomenology of true aesthetic experience and makes an experience one of felt value. The Morrisian and good-work claim is that access to such experience is a function of one’s own experiential involvement with materials and methods in one’s working life and in one’s own “manipulations”—that is, in one’s experience of handling or treating questions, artistic matter, resources, and so on with skill and intelligence.⁶¹

A good-work theory of art therefore demands audiences capable of (fit for) aesthetic experience. The demand is not simply democratic; it is ontological, too, for without such audiences there are no *works*, only curios, museum pieces, or at best an esoteric “Art” and its products. But the question is raised: Is a capable audience of *one* sufficient for art status (the artist herself indeed)? While the fusing of political and ontological that this question suggests is encouraging to Morrisians (and probably others, some of whom have been noted), it remains a theoretic flaw within the tradition of analytic aesthetics, where even the presence of only the smallest of audiences is taken to assert no pressure on the real status of an art product as a live work so long as that audience represents a defined “artworld” or the product can be related in an historic narrative to other art.⁶² To the good-work theorist, this represents the *reductio ad absurdum* of any theory that neglects the cultural and experiential bases of art in the general organization and practice of making, suggesting as it does the possibility of the long-term survival of an art that is solely esoteric and does not require an aesthetically educated audience at large.⁶³ It marks a failure to understand, and adhere to, the *global* dimensions of art, something understood by Morris and others through pitching art not *versus* craft (and fine art against popular, gallery and exhibition art against town planning, home furnishing, and decoration) but as exemplary of, and dependent on, good work throughout any society. In short, aesthetic lives—people genuinely *making* works and the existence of real *works*—require good work as the general condition of human labor.⁶⁴

These considerations of “art as good work” suggest also the importance of Morris and Arts and Crafts in the development of a theory of art and aesthetic education that can resist the broadly “anti-aesthetic” and “intellectualist” standpoint that represents the conventional wisdom of so much of philosophical aesthetics; and in this, Morris and those like him must be properly acknowledged and utilized within the tradition of pragmatist and “everyday” aesthetics.

NOTES

1. William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art* (London: Ellis and White, 1883). Volume 22 of Morris’s collected works contains the lectures in *Hopes and Fears* and fifteen other lectures delivered between 1881 and 1894: William Morris, *Collected Works*, Volume 22, ed. May Morris (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966).
2. William Lethaby, *Form in Civilisation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1922). Lethaby and Ashbee are usually described as “architects and designers.” For a comprehensive list of key figures in the Arts and Crafts Movement, with brief biographies, see *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Mary Greensted (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2005).

3. Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 27-34.
4. The link between Dewey and Everyday Aesthetics is noted, however, by Crispin Sartwell in "Aesthetics of the Everyday," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford University Press, 2003), 761-70.
5. Paul Guyer, "History of Modern Aesthetics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30.
6. For example, a recent anthology, *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), contains only one passing reference to Morris and his like (and there is no mention of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America). Tom Leddy's overview of Everyday Aesthetics in this collection, "The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics," notes "there is not a large tradition of work in everyday aesthetics," and like Sartwell he records Dewey as the "classic source of inspiration" (20).
7. William Morris, "My Very Uneventful Life," in *William Morris by Himself*, ed. Gillian Naylor (London: Time Warner Books, 2004), 23.
8. William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (London: Ellis and White, 1883), 5.
9. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 4.
10. John Ruskin, *The Lamp of Beauty: Writings on Art*, ed. Joan Evans (London: Phaidon, 1995), 261.
11. Karl Marx, *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (New York: International General, 1977), 63.
12. John Ruskin, "Ad Valorem," in *Unto This Last* (London: George Allen, 1901), 156.
13. Marx, *Marx and Engels*, 69
14. Stefan Morawski, introduction to *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski (New York: International General, 1977).
15. Quoted in "Aesthetics," in *Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, ed. Tom Bottomore (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1985), 6.
16. G. A. Cohen, "Reconsidering Historical Materialism," in *Marxist Theory*, ed. Alex Callinicos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159.
17. Morris, "Making the Best of It," in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (London: Ellis and White, 1883), 164-65.
18. William Morris, "The Beauty of Life," in *Collected Works, Volume 22* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), 56.
19. *Ibid.*, 58.
20. Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 151. In the section from which this quote is taken, Wollheim is analyzing variants of "social determination" in theories of art.
21. John Dando Sedding was an architect and important Arts and Crafts figure in the late nineteenth century. Quoted in Greensted, *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, 2.
22. *Ibid.*, 1.
23. *Ibid.*, 1.
24. *Ibid.*, 41.
25. *Ibid.*, 66.
26. *Ibid.*, 19.
27. Quoted in Greensted, *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, by Arthur Romney-Green, poet and furniture maker in the Arts and Crafts Movement (64).
28. *Ibid.*, 41.
29. *Ibid.*, 42.
30. Herbert Read, *Art and Industry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944), 49.
31. *Ibid.*, 170.
32. *Ibid.*, 53.
33. Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 151.

34. William Morris, quoted in Naylor, *William Morris by Himself*, 35.
35. Greensted, *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, 21.
36. *Ibid.*, 63.
37. *Ibid.*, 23.
38. *Ibid.*, 26.
39. *Ibid.*, 17.
40. Lethaby, *Form in Civilisation*, 167.
41. Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1940), 242.
42. Greensted, *An Anthology of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, 61. The quote is by Charles Ashbee. Lethaby makes a similar stipulation: "right doing and living will necessarily flow into noble types and beautiful forms" (*Form in Civilisation*, 167).
43. *Ibid.*, 68.
44. Roger Fry, "Art and Socialism," in *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), 78.
45. Morris, "The Beauty of Life," 63.
46. Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 172-73.
47. *Ibid.*, 173.
48. Fry, "Art and Socialism," 62.
49. Woolf, *Roger Fry*, 189.
50. *Ibid.*, 194. Fry made this statement while showing a journalist around Omega's London Fitzroy Square workshop.
51. *Ibid.*, 208.
52. *Ibid.*, 205.
53. Tate Archive online, "Omega: Background and Aims" (www.tate.org.uk).
54. William Morris, "At a Picture Exhibition," in *Art and Society: Lectures and Essays by William Morris*, ed. Gary Zabel (Boston: George's Hill, 1993), 103.
55. *Ibid.*, 101.
56. *Ibid.*, 103.
57. *Ibid.*, 103.
58. *Ibid.*, 105, 106.
59. *Ibid.*, 110.
60. *Ibid.*, 111.
61. Note also that good work is not simply about doing *lots of things*; multitasking and the opportunities to do so are widely regarded as valuable, but for Morris the essence of good work is doing something, one identifiable production, *from beginning to end*. This may well involve separate tasks, but they must be integrated and purposeful. Individuals are empowered not by the ability to multitask *per se* but by being able to control all aspects of a production—in this lies their real aesthetic education. To think of *a production* is to reference Dewey's notion of *an experience: that* identifiably complete *experience*, in Deweyan terms. This link between Morris on good work and Dewey on aesthetic experience is worth exploration; I do not pursue it here, although it is implicit.
62. Danto's "artworld" theory has been noted above. "Narrativism" is proposed by Noel Carroll; see his *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Note, too, that a good-work view has other fundamental opponents, on other grounds, notably Immanuel Kant and R. G. Collingwood on art's supposedly clear distinctions from craft. The focus of this article has been to establish and position a good-work thesis as a genuine *aesthetic theory* ready to challenge such opposing views.
63. At the risk of complaints of philistinism, the *reductio* is evident in the worst cases of minimalism and conceptualism in the arts.
64. Indeed, Morris was prepared to go so far as to suggest that the gain of a genuinely thriving, undivided art would outweigh the loss of any existing art that survives only by the work of "genius" and that is incapable of being understood by the general public. See, for example, *The Life of William Morris, Volume 2*, ed. J. W. Mackail (London: Longmans, Green, 1899), 296.