

## Reasoning about Art

*David Kelley*

Michelle Marder Kamhi and Louis Torres (2000) are quite right that the article William Thomas and I wrote, "Why Man Needs Art," for The Objectivist Center's newsletter *Navigator* (1999), focused on literature at the expense of other art forms. The article was a brief excerpt from a much longer book project, and a paragraph discussing the various forms of art was not included in this adaptation. Any appearance of bias towards literature, due to the prevalence of literary examples, was unintentional and will not be true of the book itself. They also raise a good question, one that we will have to consider in editing our manuscript, when they note that we use Rand's own examples of metaphysical value-judgments without indicating how those judgments could be expressed in artworks other than literature.

At the same time, however, Kamhi and Torres appear to have set themselves the task of finding fault with every point they could lay their hands on, no matter how minute or remotely related to anything essential—not only in my case but in their comments on Leonard Peikoff and other writers as well. They repeatedly take statements out of context, as in their citation of advertising copy from one of our seminar brochures as evidence regarding my views (Kamhi and Torres 2000, 18). They engage in ad hominem argumentation, as in the claim that Thomas and I could not introspect on our own aesthetic responses (20). They appeal to authority regarding the classification of the branches of philosophy (38–39 n. 38). They engage in equivocation, when they view our claim that art is linked to man's *capacity* for reason as a claim that all art affirms reason as a value (18–19). I trust that readers can assess such carping and sometimes fallacious claims for what they are worth.

But I do want to address the two main substantive objections that Kamhi and Torres raise: that the discussion of art in the article by Thomas and me is flawed by a neglect of Rand's concept of sense of life; and that aesthetics is a fundamental branch of philosophy.

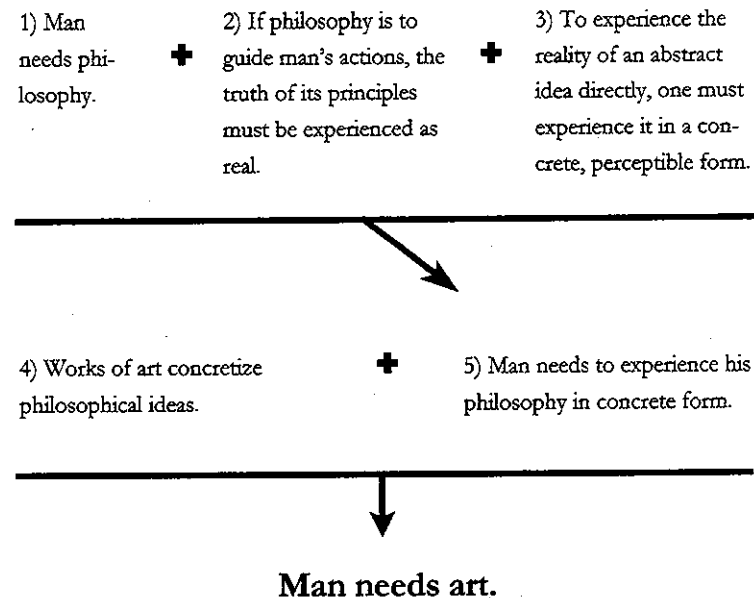
### Sense of Life

Kamhi and Torres write: "Thomas and Kelley's most egregious omission is their failure to discuss, or even mention, Rand's distinctive concept of *sense of life* . . . or her view of the crucial role of sense of life in the all-important *emotional* response to art" (19). There is no question that sense of life is an essential concept in Rand's explanation of how artists create their works and of how we respond to them. But that was not the topic of our essay. We were addressing the questions: Why is art a value? Why does man need art? How does it relate to his survival as a rational animal?

We argued, as Rand herself did, that man's need for art derives from a cognitive need for philosophy. In accordance with the basic purpose of the book from which the excerpt was taken, our discussion included a diagram of the argument's premises, conclusion, and logical structure. The key section of the diagram—which Kamhi and Torres complain "only confuses matters, lacking as it does any evident logic in the numbering of items or the vectors drawn between them" (20)—is reproduced in Diagram 1 for the reader's benefit.

In order to guide our actions and integrate our knowledge, we need some view of the nature of the world and our place in it, some view of how knowledge is acquired, some view of what values to live for and what principles to live by. That is what we mean by philosophy in Premise 1. The content of that worldview may be held in the form of a consciously articulated system of ideas, or in the form of the emotional sum that Rand described as a sense of life. The latter is the form particularly relevant to art, as well as to love (see Rand 1975, 30–33). But to establish the need for art, the essential link in the argument is the need for *concretization*, a need established by the inference from Premises (1), (2), and (3) to (5); and the insight that art provides such a concretization (Premise 4).

### Diagram 1



That we experience the concrete reality of our worldview in the form of sense of life is important for understanding how art works, but it is not the essential element in the proof that art is a human need; what's essential is the function of concretization, not the emotional form in which it occurs. To put it another way, the role of sense of life as a vehicle through which a worldview is concretized by the artist and responded to by the viewer or reader pertains to the *psychology* of art, not to the *ethical* claim that this concretization of our worldview is a value.

Of course, artworks as such rarely convey anything like an entire philosophy (in fact, it is hard to see how any art form other than a philosophical novel could do so), but the judgments they convey are philosophical in character. The relation between art and philosophy is often "subtle and indirect," as Kamhi and Torres say (20), but in

the Objectivist view that relation is nevertheless essential. It is not for concretizing "the concept of maternal love and tenderness" (20) that a painting of a mother and child is properly regarded as art. Any home video can do the same. The painting is art because of the judgments it embodies about the values involved. In this sense, art is essentially normative in character, being constructed by the selection of a certain re-creation of reality as important, worthy, or vital.

Finally, I want to emphasize that the diagram is not intended to present a rationalistic scheme, as Kamhi and Torres suggest (19), in which man's need for art is derived by pure deduction from first principles. All of the statements can be supported by inductive evidence from observation, introspection, and history. In the larger system of diagrams from which this excerpt is taken, moreover, many of the premises can only be supported inductively. The point of the diagrams is simply to show the structure of relationships among the various key principles of Objectivism.

### The Status of Aesthetics

Kamhi and Torres take issue with my view that aesthetics does not share the fundamentality of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. I have never considered it particularly important or interesting to decide what are *the* fundamental branches of philosophy, for reasons I explained in a letter they quote at length. Indeed, because fundamentality is a matter of degree, there can be no absolute distinction between fundamental and nonfundamental branches; it all depends on where you draw the line. Is my brother Peter a tall man? At 6'2" he is the tall one in my family but he would not stand out among NBA players. Just so with aesthetics. It is more fundamental than some areas of philosophy such as philosophy of history, less fundamental than metaphysics.

Kamhi and Torres respond by claiming that aesthetics is relatively more fundamental than ethics because it is on a par with, perhaps a component of, epistemology. They support this claim by appealing to Rand's analysis of man's cognitive need for art as an expression of

a worldview—the same need, ironically, that they take Thomas and me to task for stressing at the expense of sense of life. Their argument is contained in the following passage:

Perhaps most significant is [Rand's] conviction that art, like philosophy itself, serves to provide man with an integrated view of existence, but in an emotionally compelling manner. Indeed, one might argue that, in Rand's view, art is the ultimate manifestation of the human cognitive and emotional need to grasp reality perceptually, not merely in terms of abstractions, and that aesthetics is therefore a field so closely allied to epistemology as to be of major concern in philosophy. Since art is of fundamental importance for the individual, *in relation to consciousness itself*, according to Rand, the philosophy of art is logically antecedent to both ethics and politics. (18)

The problem with this argument lies in the effort to show that one branch of philosophy is logically antecedent to another. The branches of philosophy represent a classification system by which specific philosophical issues are grouped together on the basis of similarity in subject matter and in method. But relationships of logical dependence exist at the level of specific issues, propositions, and theories, not of whole branches of philosophy per se. In the case of art, the Objectivist view involves a web of logical relationships among the points in metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics rather than a simple relationship of antecedence at the level of these branches themselves. To illustrate, consider the claims in the diagram above:

1) *Man needs philosophy* (in the sense of a comprehensive view of existence): This is a normative statement, a way of stating that philosophy is a value. As such, it is an ethical claim and depends on the more basic proposition that life is an ultimate value. As a normative claim, it also rests on the metaphysical thesis that man has free will. And this particular value is a consequence of the epistemological point that reason grasps reality in conceptual form.

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2) *If philosophy is to guide man's actions, the truth of its principles must be experienced as real.* This is a descriptive claim regarding cause-and-effect in the realm of human motivation, not a normative claim like (1). It would naturally be classified within the part of metaphysics sometimes called "philosophical anthropology," which is concerned with basic aspects of human nature. It rests on introspective observations.

3) *To experience the reality of an abstract idea directly, one must experience it in a concrete, perceptible form.* This is a claim of epistemology, also descriptive, and it depends on the prior epistemological fact that the senses are our only direct cognition of reality.

4) *Works of art concretize philosophical ideas.* This is a claim of aesthetics, an inductive generalization about art that does not seem to depend on any prior claim in the other branches.

*Man needs art.* Like (1) above, this is a normative claim and it depends on the same underlying principles of ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology, as well as on point (4) from aesthetics.

In short, ethics draws on the conclusions of aesthetics to show that art is an important human value, and the explanation of why it is so important leads us back into epistemology. But ethics does not depend on aesthetics for the basic claim that life is an ultimate value, a claim that underlies all other normative claims. Nor does epistemology depend on information about art in order to establish that man's form of cognition is conceptual and that all (valid) concepts are derived from perceptual contact with the world.

## References

- Kamhi, Michelle Marder and Louis Torres. 2000. Critical neglect of Ayn Rand's theory of art. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 2, no. 1 (Fall): 1-46.
- Rand, Ayn. 1975. *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. New York: New American Library.
- Thomas, William, and David Kelley. 1999. Why man needs art. *Navigator* (July-August): 18-19.