



Oscar Wilde's Moral Philosophy: A Synthesis between Aestheticism and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Abstract

The exaggeration of Oscar Wilde's aestheticism that the work of art is purely for beauty and pleasure and has nothing to do with morality makes it very difficult for his moral philosophy to be conceived. Even his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is meant to balance his exaggeration of pleasure in his aestheticism, is often misinterpreted as an aesthetic eulogy. At the same time, some see it as a pure contradiction to his former philosophic position. This paper, therefore, attempts to identify his moral philosophy through a dialectic study of his aestheticism and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As it is qualitative research, the authors source their data primarily from literary works by Oscar Wilde, while other library materials serve as secondary sources. Various philosophical tools, especially dialectics and hermeneutics, are applied in data interpretation. The finding is that contrary to the expectation and assumption of many scholars, ethical hedonism rather than aesthetic hedonism is his moral philosophy.

Keywords: aestheticism; hedonism; Oscar Wilde; moral philosophy; Dorian Gray

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INTRODUCTION

The exaggeration in Oscar Wilde's aestheticism that beauty and pleasure are the only goals of the work of art makes his moral philosophy very difficult to conceive. Due to his emphasis on pleasure, many believe that his moral philosophy is pure aesthetic hedonism, but a critical study of his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and later confessions indicate that he was an ethical hedonist. The questions that might arise in our reader's mind are: Who is Oscar Wilde? What is Oscar Wilde's aestheti-

cism? How is his moral philosophy ethical rather than aesthetic hedonism?

The famous Irish poet and playwright Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (October 16, 1854 - November 30, 1900) was a son to an Anglo-Irish couple: Jane, née Elgee, and Sir William Wilde. When he was still very young, he learned how to speak both German and French. He proved to be very intelligent in school, winning so many awards. While at Trinity College, Dublin, and Oxford, he demonstrated to be an exceptional classist; where he, among others, studied some portions of philoso-

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phy as part of the classics and was enticed by the merging philosophy of aestheticism to the extent that he later became their spokesman (Holland, 2003; Sturgis, 2018; Mason, 1972, 1914).

After that, he moved to London, where he enjoyed fashionable cultural and social lives. He wrote many literary works: novels, poems, prose, drama, and social matters. He later lectured in the United States and Canada on the new "English Renaissance in Art" and interior decoration. He later went back to London and became a prolific journalist. He was known for his biting wit, admirable conversational skill, and flamboyant dressing that made him unique. He was indeed a personality in his time (Holland, 2003; Breen, 2000; Sturgis, 2018; Mason, 1972, 1914). Oscar Wilde was a man of aesthetics both in life and literary work. His aesthetic inclination made him refine his ideas about the supremacy of arts in a series of essays, dialogue, and plays.

His aesthetic extremity leads to his arrest and prosecution. At the climax of his success and fame, Wilde prosecuted the Marquess of Queensberry for criminal libel against him. The Marquess was the father of Lord Alfred Douglass, the Wilde's lover. The libel trial exposed Wilde's sexual indecency with many men with much evidence, making him drop the libel charges. He was arrested, tried for gross indecency with men, and was imprisoned for two years (1895-1897) with hard labor (Adut, 2000; Holland, 2003; Sturgis, 2018; Mason, 1972, 1914). During his last year in prison, he wrote *De Profundis* (which was published after his death in 1905), discussing his spiritual journey in prison, his repentance and confession, and upturning his former philosophy of pleasure (Holland, 2000). After the release, he wrote a long poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), in commemoration of the harsh rhythm of prison life. By November 25, 1900, he developed "cerebral meningitis" as a result of a severe ear injury sustained in the prison and died on November 30, 1900.

Apart from *De Profundis* and *The Bal-*

lad of Reading Gaol, other notable and organized literary works of Oscar Wilde include:

Ravenna (1878), *Poems* (1881), *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* (1888, fairy stories), *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (1891, stories), *A House of Pomegranates* (1891, fairy stories), *Intentions* (1891, essays and dialogues on aesthetics), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (first published in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* July 1890, in book form in 1891; novel), *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891, political essay), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892, play), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893, play), *The Sphinx* (1894, poem), *An Ideal Husband* (performed 1895, published 1898; play), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (performed 1895, published 1899; play) (Oscar Wilde, www.wikipedia.org)

Considering that his literary works are more of poems, novels, stories, and drama, except for *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, which can be accepted in political science and philosophy, how can such an artist be considered a philosopher? Is it possible for us to get a sound moral philosophy from such an aesthetic man who preached and practiced hedonism? Indeed, Oscar Wilde can be considered a philosopher, as he studied part of philosophy in classics. More so, his literary works contain many philosophical thoughts and ideas. His social and political philosophy is obvious in his *The Soul of Man under socialism*, where he followed the steps of Karl Marx to advocate socialism (Wilde, 2012). His epistemology can be assessed through his various essays on lying, the importance of being earnest, and various lines of his poems and drama where he epitomizes the objectivity of truth, while his moral philosophy can be synthesized from his aestheticism and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. All these are indications that Oscar Wilde is not just a mere artiste, playwright, and journalist but also a philosopher. Nonetheless, scholars have never seriously considered this established fact, talking more of identifying his moral philosophy through his literary and artistic works. Most scho-

lars assumed his ethics to be pure hedonism due to his emphasis on pleasure and beauty. Among these philosophers whose works we are going to review under Oscar Wilde's aestheticism include Berkson (2003), Belford (2000), Pearce (2004), Burdett (2014), Michele (2018), Danney (2000), Duggan (2008), Adut (2000), Paul (1998) and Sturgis (2018). Therefore, the purpose of this work is to identify ethical hedonism rather than pure aesthetic hedonism as the moral philosophy of Oscar Wilde. We argue that beauty and pleasure should not be the only concern of the work of art; they can also serve as ethical tools for social transformation. We insist that pleasure without restraint and control can lead to destruction.

METHOD

This work is qualitative research, using the literary works of Oscar Wilde as primary sources of data, while commentaries and research works by other scholars serve as sources of secondary data. The major philosophical tool applied in this study is dialectics, while others include hermeneutic interpretation, critical review, analysis, and logical reasoning (deductive and inductive reasoning). Dialectics, according to Hegel and Karl Marx, is a method where a position is established (thesis), another opposing position rises against the position (antithesis), and in order to resolve the conflict, a new position is arrived at from the thesis and antithesis (synthesis). In the next section, we see how Oscar Wilde holds aestheticism to extremity (thesis), followed in section three by (antithesis) the story of Dorian Gray, who tended to live a life of pleasure to the fullest and ended in tragedy. The conflict between Oscar Wilde's aestheticism and Dorian Gray's tragedy is synthesized into what would be taken as Oscar Wilde's Moral Philosophy (Ethical Hedonism) in section four. At the same time, the work is concluded in section five.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aestheticism of Oscar Wilde

Aestheticism (also the Aesthetic movement) was a movement in the late 19th century which emphasized "art for art's sake." According to the proponents, the chief goal of art is to create beauty and make man happy rather than serving any moral and socio-political purpose or interest (Paul, 1998; Danney, 2000). The movement originated with a radical group of artists and designers in England in the 1860s, challenging the value of the mainstream Victorian culture, which insisted that every work of art should have ethical imports. According to Carolyn (2014), "Many Victorians passionately believed that literature and art fulfilled important ethical roles. Literature provided models of correct behavior: it allowed people to identify with situations in which good actions were rewarded or provoked tender emotions. At best, the sympathies stirred by art and literature would spur people to action in the real world, while aesthetes argued that "art had nothing to do with morality." The primary concern of art for them was the elevation of pleasure and pursuit of beauty. For them, a work of art is merely for happiness; it should not be judged on the basis of morality but strictly on its form. This philosophy is extended beyond literary work to practical living.

The explosion of aesthetic philosophy in *fin-de-siècle* English society, as exemplified by Oscar Wilde, was not confined to merely art, however. Rather, the proponents of this philosophy extended it to life itself. Here, aestheticism advocated whatever behavior was likely to maximize the beauty and happiness in one's life, in the tradition of hedonism. To the aesthete, the ideal life mimics art; it is beautiful, but quite useless beyond its beauty, concerned only with the individual living it. Influences on others, if existent, are trivial at best (Duggan, 2008, p.61).

This philosophical movement attracted the attention of many writers, including William Morris and Oscar Wilde. Wilde did his best to "transpose the beauty

he saw in art into daily life." This was a practical as well as a philosophical project. Wilde was quoted:

It is indeed to become a part of the people's life . . . I mean a man who works with his hands; and not with his hands merely, but with his head and his heart. The evil that machinery is doing is not merely the consequence of its work but also the fact that it makes men themselves machines. Whereas we wish them to be artists, that is to say, men (Pearce, 2004, p. 144).

For him, aestheticism is a life, not a mere philosophy. Applying it in a more universal sense, Wilde stressed the positive influence of aestheticism as a philosophy beyond mere craftsmanship. "Just as the machines that mass-produce materials with the intervention of human thought are labeled 'evil'," he likewise "condemns men who act as metaphorical machines, programmed to behave in accordance with society's ideas of propriety rather than allowing themselves to act freely and achieve the greatest amount of happiness" (Duggan, 2008, p. 63).

Carolyn Burdett (2014), writing on aestheticism and decadence, explains, "Wilde teased his readers with the claim that life imitates art rather than the other way round. His point was a serious one: we notice London fogs, he argued because art and literature have taught us to do so". Oscar Wilde, among others, "practicalized" these maxims. He always dressed himself in an outlandish manner that attracted people's attention. When he was queried on the report that he was seen moving down the Piccadilly in London with a lily-long hair flowing, his reply was, "It's not whether I did it or not that's important, but whether people believed I did it" (Michele, 2018, p.285). He believed that artists should hold to aesthetic ideals and that pleasure and beauty should be paramount in their minds instead of utilitarian ethics (Berkson, 2003; Belford, 2000).

Oscar Wilde, in his lifetime, wrote many works promoting aesthetic philosophy. His literary works were indeed motivated by this philosophy. His lifestyle also

conformed to this philosophy. He became addicted to the pleasures of life: drinking, partying, and sexual indulgence (Adut, 2000; Sturgis, 2018). It was this lifestyle that led to his imprisonment and early death. This shows that pleasure uncontrolled can lead to sorrow and untimely death (Adut, 2000). *The Picture of Dorian Gray* also confirms this, but people often misunderstand it to be Wilde's declaration on the promotion of pure and unconditional aesthetic life without restriction. However, this is a shallow interpretation of the novel.

A Synopsis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

This novel is a story about a portrait of Dorian Gray painted by Basil Hallward, an artist who has been infatuated with the beauty of Dorian Gray (Wilde, 2007; Holland, 2003). Hallward is a friend of Lord Henry Wotton, who preaches hedonism, emphasizing that life should be lived to the fullest. Dorian gets to know Henry through Basil. His encounter with Lord Henry enralls him with the aristocratic hedonistic worldview that the only things worthy of pursuit in life are beauty and sensual fulfillment. This understanding makes Dorian determined to sell his soul to ensure he enjoys life to the fullest and to remain young. He resolves that the picture will age and fade rather than himself growing older. He tries to keep himself younger and surrenders himself to an immoral life. While he stays young and beautiful, the portrait keeps reminding him of all his sins.

In the process of pursuing unrestricted aestheticism learned from Lord Henry, Dorian meets actress Sibyl Vane, who is performing Shakespeare plays in a dingy working-class theatre. He approaches and talks to her, telling her how much he loves her. He soon proposes to marry her. His handsomeness made Sibyl accept the proposal. Sibyl fancies him, calls him "Charming Prince," and feels loved. His overprotective brother James is not comfortable with the relationship and warns that if Dorian harms her, he will have Dorian killed. Dorian invites his friends, including Lord

Henry, to watch Sibyl perform Romeo and Juliet. Unfortunately, Sibyl being enamored with Dorian, acts poorly, making Basil and Henry think that Sibyl has fallen in love with Dorian because of his "charming beauty". This embarrassment makes Dorian insult Sibyl, telling her that he loves her because of her acting, that "Without your art, you are nothing," and that she no longer interests him (Wilde, 2007, p. 101). Dorian gets home only to find out that his wish to remain young is granted; the portrait fades while he remains young. Conscience-stricken and lonely, Dorian feels remorse for how he spoke to Sibyl and decides to reconcile with her, but it is too late as Sibyl out of depression has killed herself. Dorian locks up the portrait, pursuing a life of pleasure and sensualities.

One night, before leaving for Paris, his friend Basil goes to Basil's house asking him about the rumors of his sensualities that he has been hearing. Dorian does not deny the allegation but takes Basil to where he has kept the portrait. Basil could no longer recognize the portrait as Dorian became younger than the portrait. He only recognizes that he was the person who made the portrait by his signature affixed to it. Basil, being horrified, begs Dorian to repent and pray for salvation. His insistence angers Dorian, who sees Basil as one of those that have contributed to his degeneration. Out of rage, he stabs Basil to death. Dorian then calmly blackmails Allan Campbell, his old friend, to use his knowledge of chemistry to destroy Basil's body. Alan, who succumbed but could no longer bear the guilt, commits suicide.

To free himself from the guilt of his action, Dorian Gray goes to an opium den, where, unknown to him, James, the brother of late Sibyl, is there. James has been seeking an opportunity to avenge the death of his sister but is not certain of Dorian's identity, as all he knew about Dorian was the name "the Charming Prince." James sees him but cannot recognize him because he appears younger. When he approaches Dorian to ascertain his identity, Dorian denies knowing anything about Sibyl, who

died eighteen years ago, as he is too young to have known her. Dorian has left before James learns he is the "the Charming Prince."

James begins to stalk Dorian, making him afraid. However, during a shooting party, a hunter accidentally kills James, who is lurking in a thicket. Returning to London, Dorian tells Lord Henry of his resolve to live righteously henceforth. His new probity begins with deliberately not breaking the heart of the naïve Hetty Merton, his newly found lover. Dorian wonders whether his newly found goodness has rescinded the corruption in the picture but finds out that the picture remains aged while he is younger.

Deciding that only true confession will absolve him of his sins, he decides to destroy the last evidence of his sins. In a rage, he takes the knife with which he kills Basil and stabs the portrait. The servants, hearing the noise and crying from the locked room, invite the police. On entering the room, they find an unknown old man with a disfigured and withered body on the floor. They are able to identify the corpse of Dorian only by the rings on his fingers. While he looks very old, the picture beside him becomes beautiful again.

Ethical Hedonism: The Oscar Wilde's Moral Philosophy

Reading his aestheticism gives the impression that his moral philosophy is hedonism. Hedonism, as an ethical philosophy, promotes pleasure. If you ask a hedonist: What is good? His likely answer is that which gives you pleasure. Aestheticism is reasonable to some extent because, according to Aristotle's ethics, that which fulfills its function is good (Stumpf, 1994). If the function of art is to give us beauty and pleasure, aestheticism passes any criticism. But the question is: is pleasure and beauty the sole function of art? Art should be relevant to social issues. Promoting beauty and pleasure alone without morality can lead to disaster (Stern, 2017). This is what is portrayed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

In the novel, Lord Henry Wotton preaches aestheticism in a captivating manner that makes Dorian Gray fall for it; even the reader, if not clever, can fall for it. The elegance and bravado of aestheticism advanced by Lord Henry seduced Dorian into it. However, it would be mistaken for one to interpret the novel as Wilde's patent recommendation for unrestrained aestheticism. A critical study of the novel shows that it contradicts the aesthete's position that pleasure and beauty are only things worth living for and should be pursued without restraint. The novel, refuting this idea, presents a strong case for the inherent immorality of purely aesthetic lives. Dorian Gray represents the aesthetic lifestyle in action, pursuing personal gratification with reckless abandonment. Yet, as he enjoys these indulgences, his behavior leads to his untimely and that of others. He died unhappier than ever.

The tragedy and the death of Dorian Gray, who gives himself totally to pleasure and sensualities, points out that pleasure and beauty must be pursued with reasoning and rationality; this distinguishes us from mere animals. We must control our senses and appetites. Had it been that Dorian Gray controlled his appetite and lust, he would not have died the way he did. Sibyl herself would not have died. Even the death of Basil was a consequence of Dorian's sins.

The implication of this is that Oscar Wilde's moral philosophy is not a mere aesthetic hedonism but ethical hedonism. This means that while pursuing pleasure, one must simultaneously consider its consequences to oneself and others. In a letter to the *St. James's Gazette*, Wilde admits that *Dorian Gray* "is a story with a moral lesson. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment" (Wilde, 2007, p.248). It is good that aestheticism condemns renunciation, but excessive obedience to these desires is subversively dangerous. Therefore, in practicing Wilde's aestheticism, forethought and constraint are necessary, as if lacking, they can lead to doom, as seen in the case of Do-

rian Gray.

Wilde demonstrates this ability to control the hedonism of aestheticism by the last stage of Dorian's life. In his essay "Aestheticism and Social Anxiety in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Mitsuharu Matsuoka points out that as Dorian's death approaches, "Dorian ultimately reacts against his lifestyle, choking on his new hedonism," at which point "a great sense of doom hangs over Dorian" (Matsuoka, 2003, p. 78). Indeed, he realizes the consequences of his sins, but it appears to him that he is too far to be salvaged. Revealing his epiphany to Lord Henry, Dorian says: "The soul is a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned or made perfect. There is a soul in each one of us. I know it" (Wilde, 2007, p.211). Unfortunately for Dorian, this realization comes too late to save his soul from the age-long corruption nurtured by a purely aesthetic life. He is, therefore, destroyed by his life of pleasure.

CONCLUSION

From the critical study of Oscar Wilde's aestheticism and *The Picture of the Dorian Gray*, we synthesize that Oscar Wilde's moral philosophy is ethical hedonism. This ethical hedonism should also be a guiding principle for artists. Work of art should not concern itself with beauty and pleasure alone; it should also affect lives positively. For instance, music has been proven beyond all reasonable doubt to be an effective agent of social and moral engineering, and this applies to other forms of art. Pleasure and beauty should not be prioritized above morality. As we enjoy the pleasures of life, we must apply self-control and restraint. Pleasure unbridled leads to destruction. The tragic end of Oscar Wilde and *Dorian Gray* is a lesson to all who live after pleasure (Stern, 2017). In his theory of meaning, Aristotle admonishes us neither to be too righteous nor sensual. We must control our emotions and lust (Aristotle, 1976). Life must be balanced. Those who have given themselves

total pleasure should now repent and seek salvation when it is still day.

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