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ARTS & CULTURE

The Arts And The Health Of The Soul

Scientific studies assert that the arts may have a positive impact on our lifespan. But such a rich sphere of thought as the arts can't be so simply reduced.

By **Robert Cooperman**

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Can participating in the arts extend our life? According to a recent study in the journal "Innovations in Aging," the answer is a resounding "yes." Claiming to be "the first evidence that engaging in arts and cultural activities is associated with a slower pace of biological aging," the study, published in May 2026, proposes that the arts and cultural activities should inform public health policy as populations age.

This is not the sort of article I generally pick up to read in my leisure time. I did so, however, because of a newspaper article, written for the layman, that piqued my interest: Peter Tennant's "Creative Living." Tennant, a self-described scientist, references the aforementioned study but dismisses its conclusions on a number of grounds. First, the data is not nearly robust enough to make such a determination. Second, much more account must be taken of the lifestyles, wealth, and leisure time of the population studied. Lastly, it must be determined whether one's general health makes it possible to engage with the arts at all.

While Tennant concedes that engaging with the arts can be reduce stress, which is beneficial for the health, he suggests that diet and exercise play a much greater role than cultural activities in sustaining and even prolonging life.

Tennant may indeed be correct, but I have never engaged with the arts to keep diabetes at bay or to experience a cardio workout. Tennant's inquiry—"Does engagement with the arts slow aging?"—misses the mark as the question to ask. It is too grounded in the hard sciences, too reliant on outcomes that lack nuance and subtlety, and too focused on prolonging the inevitable for individuals without any greater social impact. In short, the pursuit of the answer to Tennant's question is a cold, calculating journey to the obvious.

What, then, is the better question? May I propose, "Does engagement with the arts enrich and strengthen the soul?" For that answer, we should turn not to medicine or gerontology journals, but to philosophers or to the artists themselves.

A Belief as Old as Time

Ancient cultures, including the Egyptians, the Chinese, and the Hebrews, have long noted the soul's existence as a way to explain the life force present in all human beings. Aristotle's treatise "De Anima" ("On the Soul") defines the soul (the psyche) as an active essence in a living body and inseparable from that body.

Aside from its accepted existence, does the soul lead us to the good? Aristotle believed that human flourishing and virtue represented our ultimate goodness and could be achieved through the active exercise of the rational soul, which was unique to humans. Plato saw the soul as the true essence of the person. Unlike Aristotle, he believed it existed before birth and survived after death. Similar to Aristotle, Plato saw the soul as a source of goodness, but only the rational soul could achieve this higher calling. The significant Roman philosopher Plotinus surmised that the human soul was meant to journey away from the material world toward its ultimate destination: the "One," the basis for all reality and the source of the good.

Greek and Roman notions of the soul greatly influenced early Christian thinkers. St. Augustine believed the soul to be inherently good, precisely because it was created by God, the source of all goodness. Similarly, St. Thomas Aquinas recognized the essential goodness of the soul as a manifestation of the divine.

Through antiquity and early Christian thinkers, a strong belief has persisted in the soul and that it's a manifestation of goodness. The concept of a soul has remained a topic of debate ever since, with some modern theorists disavowing its existence altogether. Yet, the acceptance of a soul remains very much a belief throughout the world, with the Pew Research Center's 2024–2025 global survey showing there is widespread belief in the soul or something considered soul-like (the afterlife, for example).

With this in mind, and with my own bias of the existence of a soul, I ask: How do we apply this concept of a soul to the arts? Should not the arts be a source of the good, the beautiful, and the true? Can the arts ignite the life force, reinforce our innate sense of virtue, and give us a glimpse of the holy? According to great artists of our Western tradition, the answer is "yes."

Like the philosophers, artists do not agree on what the soul is, but they acknowledge that it exists and is powerful indeed. Goethe referred to creating "a more beautiful humanity," achieved through encountering the arts. He wrote specifically that people "should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of [one's] life in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul."

Shakespeare's Sonnet 146 directly addresses the soul, pleading to it to focus on inner rather than outward qualities. Milton's "Paradise Lost" is a meditation on the growth of the soul after the fall of man. William Blake, in numerous works, suggests that the soul is human existence and the source of imagination, which, in turn, creates art.

A Soul's Sustenance

If we agree that art derives its power from the soul of its creator, does it have the power to enrich the souls of those who experience it?

I answer this in the affirmative and again turn to Plotinus to guide my thinking. If we think of souls as unseen, silent entities outside our bodies that float in the air traveling from person to person, we have missed the point. Plotinus, the one philosopher who most deeply examined the idea of "soul-to-soul" contact, posits that souls interact naturally because they exist and are unified at a higher realm.

In short, they do not need to interact because they already are one. This co-presence aligns souls to recognize truth, goodness, and beauty: the very things one seeks in the arts. If Plotinus is correct, when art, derived from the soul of the artist, portrays truth, goodness, and beauty, it creates a state of recognition with other souls on a deeper level. It has nothing to do with motion, distance, or physical interaction. Rather, it is about realignment with a metaphysical realm that we recognize in our own likeness. For Plotinus, the greatest example of this is love.

The final question, then, is does this nurturing of the soul have life-extending benefits? That's hard to answer. Evidence abounds that meditating and reducing stress has physiological benefits that can extend life. But the soul itself is not thought of to be biological and thus cannot be measured in the same way as one's heart rate or lung capacity. For some, the soul is immortal and therefore needs no life-extension.

The best way to approach this issue is to understand that no matter what your age or health, your soul always needs enriching, and when confronted with art that promotes the good, the beautiful, and the true, you'll feel an almost indescribable sense of well-being that may ultimately be better for you than a two-mile jog or a plate of vegetables.

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