In this work Friedrich Schiller, a leading literary figure in Germany, attempts to explain how art (or aesthetic experience) is crucial to making human beings better (morally), given that aesthetic experience displays a special kind of harmonious unity of opposites (e.g., of the sensual and the intellectual) that can ameliorate the fractured state in which modern human beings find themselves. One point of emphasis for us will be Schiller’s conception of history, which is neither progressive nor based on the straightforward development of reason (as was the case for Enlightenment thinkers like Lessing and Kant), but rather involves an attempt to recover the kind of ideal that ancient Greek civilization had managed to (unselfconsciously) achieve.

**Historical Background:**
- Along with Goethe, Schiller is one of the greatest writers in Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries. His first play, *The Robbers*, which was a mature expression of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, made him famous at a young age. Like Goethe, as his career progressed, he moved on to make important contributions to Classicism and was a source of Romanticism (e.g., Novalis).
- Having grown up during the French Revolution, but at a safe distance, Schiller was attracted by the ideals of equality, liberty, and brotherhood, and was interested in a more liberal political agenda (e.g., in favor of a republic rather than the power of the aristocracy).

**Intellectual Background:**
- Schiller was heavily influenced by Kant, both by his moral theory and by his aesthetics. Schiller interprets Kant’s moral theory (arguably incorrectly) as maintaining that to act morally one has to act against one’s sensible inclinations (e.g., one’s desires). Since to act morally is to act rationally for Kant, Schiller thinks that Kant, in effect, forces us to choose between our intellect (insofar as it gives rise to the Categorical Imperative) and our senses (insofar as it gives rise to our desires). That is, he interprets Kant as if human beings are fundamentally divided within ourselves. (Note: Schiller will reject this model.)
- Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment notes that such judgments are unlike theoretical (scientific) judgments in that they do not make objective claims about what an object is and are not true or false. But they are also unlike practical (moral) judgments in that they do not assert what we ought to do, do not concern the good, and are not based on our desires. At the same time, they are also not purely subjective expressions of what we feel, since we expect inter-subjective agreement about what is and is not beautiful (even in the face of actual disagreement). Kant accounts for this special status by claiming that when we experience a work of art, our different cognitive faculties (our intellect, our senses, and our imagination) are at work. What’s more, they act harmoniously in giving rise to a feeling of pleasure (but without being motivated by a feeling of desire). – Schiller accepts the basic elements of Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment. (Note: He wants to put this account to work in ways that Kant did not foresee.)

**Schiller’s Main Position:**
- Schiller’s analysis of contemporary society is similar to Rousseau’s in the sense that he thinks that in the past, (certain) human beings were good, whereas now they are corrupt and stand in need of improvement. (His analysis of the cause of that is somewhat different from Rousseau’s, since he emphasizes the lack of unity or harmony among the different aspects of human beings and human society rather than inequalities of different sorts.) Schiller also thinks that both
modern human beings and societies are divided in unhealthy ways. (What is true of the part is also true of the whole, and vice versa.) He gives lengthy descriptions of all the polarities or divisions within human beings and human societies. (In the case of human beings, it is, e.g., between the senses and the intellect. In the case of societies, it is, e.g., between the state and its citizens.)

• Schiller is attracted to important parts of Kant’s moral theory (freedom, rationality, and morality), but does not think that Kant has given a satisfactory explanation of how human beings could actually become moral. Simply recommending that one have courage and not be lazy may not be particularly effective. Nor is it that especially helpful to say that you should not give in to your selfish desires. In addition, Schiller identifies a basic problem with becoming moral. Human beings, considered as sensible beings, are bad in their current state, so their current sensible state will not cause them to improve. Human beings, considered insofar as they have moral ideals, will not be able to use these moral ideals to become better, because these are mere ideals our intellect thinks up, which cannot have any effect on our sensible side. So what is needed is something that is sensible, since we need something that can have an effect on our sensible side. But what is needed must also have an intellectual side, since we need something higher, something that rises above our sensible side, and our intellect can represent ideals that transcend the vicissitudes of the contingencies we encounter in our day to day lives. His claim is that aesthetic experience, roughly as Kant understands it, can do this job, since this kind of experience is both sensible and intellectual. (This is one of the most important points Schiller is making here.)

• Schiller thinks that the Greeks were not divided in the way in which modern societies are. One of the great accomplishments of Greek civilization was that they achieved a special kind of unity of their different sides (even if they did so in an unreflective way). With the demise of Greek civilization, this unity was destroyed, e.g., through the specialization of intellectual expertise, through the division of labor, and through various socio-political changes. This was necessary insofar as certain benefits could be achieved only through these developments. (E.g., science could never have developed in quite the way it has without specialization.) Still, it did make human beings worse off. Schiller thinks that the task that we face is to recapture the unity that we once had, but without giving up on the advantages that we reap from the development of our different capacities (in isolation from each other). So the path of human history is not one of a uniformly linear upward trajectory (as Enlightenment thinkers might have thought), but rather a great high, followed by a long and tortuous low, which can be succeeded by the recovery of the kind of achievement the Greeks had managed in the past. That is, we need to have a unity of our head and our heart, rather than deep-seated conflict between the two. Aesthetic experience is, Schiller thinks, the necessary means to this lofty end.

Reading Questions:
1. “What is true of moral experience must be true, in a still higher degree, of the manifestation of Beauty. Its whole enchantment lies in its mystery, and its very essence is extinguished with the extinction of the necessary combination of its elements” (p. 25 First Letter). What features does Schiller think are essential to both beauty and morality? How can they be destroyed? (Can you give an example of how aesthetic experience can be “extinguished”?)

2. “I hope to convince you … that we must indeed, if we are to solve that political problem in practice, follow the path of aesthetics, since it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom. But
this proof cannot be adduced until I have reminded you of the principles by which Reason is in general guided in political legislation” (p. 27, Second Letter). What is the connection between Reason and Freedom? And how does Beauty lead to Freedom?

3. “But the physical man is actual, and the moral man only problematical” (p. 29, Third Letter). If “problematical” means possible and contrasts with actual, what does Schiller mean to be saying by describing “moral man” as problematic?

4. “We must therefore search for some support for the continuation of society, to make it independent of the actual State which we want to abolish. This support is not to be found in the natural character of Man, which, selfish and violent as it is, aims far more at the destruction than the preservation of society” (p. 30, Third Letter). In what ways is the natural character of human beings selfish and violent? Why can it not support the continuation of society?

5. “But the will of Man stands completely free between duty and inclination, and no physical compulsion can or may encroach upon this sovereign right of his personality. If therefore he is to retain this capacity for choice and nevertheless be a reliable link in the causal concatenation of forces, this can only be achieved if the operations of both those motives … prove to be exactly similar…so that his impulses are sufficiently consonant with his reason to have the value of a universal legislation” (p. 31 Fourth Letter). What does it mean for human beings to be a “reliable link in the causal concatenation of forces”? Why is that necessary? How could our impulses be consonant with “universal legislation”?

6. “It is true that deference to authority has declined, that its lawlessness is unmasked, and, although still armed with power, sneaks no dignity any more; men have awoken from their long lethargy and self-deception, and by an impressive majority they are demanding the restitution of their inalienable rights” (p. 34 Fifth Letter). What event is Schiller referring to here?

7. “Whence comes this disadvantageous relation of individuals in spite of all the advantages of the race? Why was the individual Greek qualified to be the representative of his time, and why may the individual modern not dare to be so? Because it was all-uniting Nature that bestowed upon the former, and all-dividing intellect that bestowed upon the latter, their respective forms. It was culture itself that inflicted this wound upon modern humanity. As soon as enlarged experience and more precise speculation made necessary a sharper division of the sciences on the one hand, and on the other, the more intricate machinery of the States made necessary a more rigorous dissociation of ranks and occupations, the essential bond of human nature was torn apart, and a ruinous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance” (p. 39, Sixth Letter). What are the differences between the ancient Greeks and modern human beings? How did culture itself inflict a wound on humanity? What are “enlarged experience” and “more precise speculation” referring to? What is “a more rigorous dissociation of ranks and occupations”?

8. “That zoophyte character of the Greek States, where every individual enjoyed an independent life and, when need arose, could become a whole in himself, now gave place to an ingenious piece of machinery, in which out of the botching together of a vast number of lifeless parts a collective mechanical life results. State and Church, law and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was separated from labour, means from ends, effort from reward. Eternally chained to
only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment” (p. 40 Sixth Letter). What is the unity of the individual human in the Greek state? In what respects is it “torn asunder” in modern society?

9. “If, therefore, the principles I have laid down are correct, and experience confirms my description of the present time, we must continue to regard every attempt at reform as inopportune, and every hope based on it as chimerical, until the division of the inner Man has been done away with, and his nature has developed with sufficient completeness to be itself the artificer, and to guarantee reality to the political creation of Reason” (p. 46, Seventh Letter). What is Schiller suggesting is necessary for human beings to improve their situation?