



## Review of Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth After Plato*

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**Abstract:** *Art and Truth After Plato* provides us with a powerful historical and epistemological sweep. Time changes and past thoughts, art and history no longer satisfies the human needs it once did. This is not to say philosophy, art and history is over or done with, lost, or dead. Contemporary philosophizing and aesthetics frees man to know the truth of actual reality of this historical moment and no longer entangled by inherited dogmas and ideologies.

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My earliest aesthetic experience came from listening to the radio. In the exciting Western "tales of yesteryear" the virtuous Lone Ranger fought injustice until goodness triumphed. Like most children I was a naive realist so I knew radio shows were fictional, but I also believed that I heard good, pleasing, and true imitations of reality. *Art and Truth After Plato* by Tom Rockmore begins with Transcendentals.<sup>1</sup> These primary descriptions of reality are used as predicates of ordinary objects. The One, True, Good, and Beauty (a late add on) Transcendentals that go beyond, surpass, or transcend single trues, goods, or beauties. The universal and eternal Transcendentals crisscross the border between ontology and epistemology, i.e. whatever the real is, it is one, true, good and beautiful. Hence the "one the many" was the first metaphysical problem of Western philosophy. The first epistemological problem follows

choosing monism over pluralism. If the real is one, true good, then what is truth-value can be assigned to many appearances and beauties.

The tripartite structure of the book is realized brilliantly. Rockmore weaves historicism with an epistemological analysis of art and truth. The conclusions of these two investigations become the premises for the final chapter containing Rockmore's thinking about contemporary aesthetics and philosophy – in speculations. The first structural feature is methodological. Each chapter provides a chronology of aesthetics from ancient Greeks onwards. Historicism shows the unique contribution of each culture, and highlights what is changed in successive eras. As examples, the inherent spirituality within experience is reflected palpably by medieval manuscripts, liturgy, sacred music, illustrations, and cathedrals; whereas, the next history of modern philosophy reversed the necessity of theological revelation to supplement thinking to a radical expansion of pure rationality. Second, the

<sup>1</sup> Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth After Plato*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2013, 344 pages. [Henceforth cited as *ATP*]

methodology is tied to a rigorous examination of mimesis, representative theories of perception and the doctrine of truth as correspondence. Arguments examine what and how we know connections between truth and art in support or denial of Keats' famous statement: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (*ATP* 233). Third, the book summarizes current aesthetic possibilities together with thoughtful accounts of knowing, meaning and interpretation as well as Rockmore's own version of categorical/constructivist epistemology.

Philosophers, like jurors, seek "the whole truth and nothing but the truth." Parmenides, who lived before Plato, divided "the way of truth" or Being that is one, true, and good from "the way of seeming" or world of appearances. His predecessors argument is clear: Being is/ Non-being is not/ What is not is nothing/ Therefore, all change or motion between what is and what is not is false and impossible. Plato's dialogues also contrast true "really real" from appearances. Art objects are demeaned as changing imitations of unchanging, but Plato occasionally provides accounts of transcendental intuitions. Diotema, in *Symposium*, describes "stepping stones" by which the soul rises from beautiful physical objects to internal beauties of character, to mastery of a discipline of knowledge and to the largest encompassing beauty of government harmonizing many interests. The dialectical ascent culminates with an ineffable intuition of eternal beauty in which the imperfect imitations participate. In the *Republic*, a "divided line" of geometric and mathematical abstractions separates the world of appearances from intuitions of the "really real." The task of contemplation is to incarnate universal forms into a conservative Republic of laws ruled over by philosopher kings who minimize change and banish mimetic art. The telling point of Rockmore's method and analysis in the first chapter is that the theory of forms and arguments against mimesis are not logically connected. Despite criticism by himself and others, Plato never offers a full account of forms. Hence, one can deny Transcendentals as universal and eternal forms but the arguments repudiating mimesis remain: what do imitations imitate, what are the criteria to know whether art or propositions are true or false?

Chapter two names Aristotle as founder of the Anti-Platonic tradition. Asserting that he loves his friends but loves the truth more, Aristotle questions the Transcendentals as recognition of true, good, and beauty presupposes the existence of a rational mind. The participation of finite things in universal forms, and

the privileged status Plato accords to the good as the supreme form confesses that Plato had no explanations of causality or the logical conversion of universal, necessary, and eternal forms. Turning to art, Aristotle says poetry is closer to philosophy since its content is more universal than the particulars of history. Specifically, tragic drama offers a true mimesis of character and life as acknowledged by the guilt and pity experienced by the audience. The Platonic and anti-Platonic traditions denying or affirming a connection between art and truth begins in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and extends for more than two millennia. That a picture is worth a thousand words is a visible cliché in Raphael's painting, *The School of Athens*. Completed in 1509, the center depicts Plato pointing upwards and Aristotle pointing downwards and the two thinkers are surrounded by various schools of philosophers (including a selfie of Raphael on the Aristotelian side).

Epistemology studies the contentious relations between objects and subjects. Waxing and waning between claims that percepts and concepts capture objective truth or how subjectivity adds or subtracts from knowledge of extra reality. Modern philosophy extended the theory of knowledge beyond mimesis to representative theories of perception and all mental/material representations and the correspondence theory of truth. In fact, the epistemological role of subject and object is the narrative history of philosophy from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries.

Modern philosophy begins with a methodical doubt. René Descartes would give up skepticism only if he knew with certainty that a sensation or idea had a true correspondence with an extra-mental object. Perceptual distortions and vague ideas and the extraordinary assumption of an evil genius deceiving us about the true content of distinct ideas e.g. we think that two plus two equals four but in reality the sum is four and one half. No indubitable object turned up until the famous proposition, *Cogito, ergo sum*. Thinking entails the existence of a thinker. Even if I am deceived as to the objective content of all my thoughts, I am certain that I exist. The *cogito* is an innate idea arising from the power of reason alone. A survey turns up other innate ideas. Most prominent is the idea of a supreme, perfect being. Descartes ontological proof of God's existence follows. The idea of a supreme being is an effect produced by a cause that actually possesses the power expressed by the effect. Either I am God (the only known true existent) or God exists. I am not supreme or perfect and therefore God is. Other innate ideas include scientific

and mathematical propositions but the evil genius could deceive me as to their objective correlative. But a perfect being could not deceive me. Therefore, God guarantees an exact object for every distinct idea even in instances where there is no sensory experience for empirical confirmation. Modern science and technology follows Descartes realization that insofar as the external world is reducible to quantity or number it can be known with complete certitude. Rationalism is more indebted to God than any medieval philosophy and contemporary astrophysics makes the same assumptions but without God's hands on epistemological certification. For Baruch Spinoza, reality is one, infinite substance that can be called God or Nature. Knowledge is about the causal relations of the psychophysical parallelism of the attributes of thought and extension. To Gottfried Leibniz, reality is a living dynamic equation of analytic propositions in which the predicate is pre-contained in the subject and this is the reason why it exists rather than another possibility.

Empiricists retreated to the actuality of ordinary experience. John Locke claimed that if we shut and reopened our eyes and the furniture remained then we are not hallucinating but perceiving. His modest account of sensation, memory, imagination, and cognition derived from simple ideas is sufficient to "muddle through" life, i.e. slightly better than probability but nothing close to rationalist certitudes. Successive British empiricists offer best argument for and best refutation of representative perception and the true correspondence of subject and object. George Berkeley argues that if reality is a dualism of mind and matter; then, matter cannot be represented, as it is by definition unperceivable and inconceivable. But if we accept that matter signifies nothing then, *esse est percipi* expresses the true correspondence between ideas in the mind and physical ideas outside the mind. After this epistemological solution Berkeley retired from philosophy at age twenty-six.

David Hume could not refute Berkeley but he did not believe the argument. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume offers an analogy between skulls on the water and representative knowledge. When the rowers stop the boat's momentum carries it forward. He compares this momentum with a propensity of the imagination to feign connections found chiefly in children, poets, and philosophers. "We must pardon children, because of their age; poets, because they profess to follow implicitly the suggestions of their fancy: But what excuse shall we find to justify our philosophers in so

signal a weakness?"<sup>2</sup> Sensations are mental pictures of outside objects outside the mind. Every idea is a contingent example of a particular object. But there is no universality or necessity derivable from singular matters of fact and real existence. Even worse there is no possible escape from our interior experience of impressions and ideas to see if representations have objective validity. What argument could prove that reality has to conform to human percepts and concepts? The opposite of every matter of fact and real existence is conceivable without contradiction Hume's skepticism asserts that beyond bare particulars, the intelligible world is a product of the human imagination.

The narrative of knower/known relations has been plagued by epistemological arguments over the truthfulness of imitations, representations, and corresponding ideas "inside" the mind and the objective referent "outside" the mind. Pure objectivity had been the gold standard of truth and certitude. Like Aristotle's description of the mind as a "blank tablet," intellects were loci for the passive inscription of images and concepts. Rationalists expanded the scope of the knowing subject to include the intelligibility of the universe. But the benefits to science and technology were checked by the deflationary accounts of experience as vagaries of sensations, limited memories bundled together by speculative imaginations.

Idealism has an epistemological advantage over rationalism and empiricism in demonstrating truth as identity between idea and real. Chapters 4 through 6 deal with the history of eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophy, a period dominated by idealist thinkers. A full reading of the text is recommended since Rockmore is a much-published scholar in this area. This review cites only a few examples of radical re-thinking of epistemology and ontology from Immanuel Kant to Karl Marx and beyond. This uniquely complex and creative philosophizing has a Promethean dimension—Prometheus defied the gods and gave man the gift of fire as a power of domination. Philosophical systems appear in which subjects create knowable worlds of objects or the universe creates subjects in order to become self-conscious or reality as an unfolding historical process in which subjects and objects become one, true reality.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Project Gutenberg EBook 2010, Book I, Part IV, Section III, [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0008](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm#link2H_4_0008), last accessed 4-24-2014.

Kant agrees with Hume that there is no proof that subjective knowledge corresponds to extra-mental reality. The "Copernican revolution" asks if it is possible that objects must conform to subjective understanding. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argues that subjective forms of intuitions and categories of understanding are universal and necessary conditions for the possibility of all appearances. Thus object X appears in a particular space at a given time; that quantitatively X shows up as one, some or all; that X presents itself as affirmative, negative or unknown quality; that X is seen in reciprocal, causal or non-causal relations. All this knowledge is a priori and independent of whatever X is but these empty forms and categories are universal and necessary conditions for the possibility of any X appearing or being understood in declarative, disjunctive, or hypothetical judgments.

There is a difference between the constituted world of appearance and the world as it is in itself. We do not understand the world-in-itself because of antinomies or seeming contradictions. We can think about reality in contradictory pairs as created/uncreated, and consisting of substantial/relational entities, which are free/determined and susceptible to theist/atheistic interpretation. This dialectic is the history of philosophy in subject/object terms. Logically we know one side of each antinomy must be true and the other false. But there is no sensation of the whole world and human experience is the same whether the world is created or eternal and the subject is theist or atheist. Therefore, philosophy ends with irresolvable contradictions. The future of reason is to abandon philosophical speculations about thinkable but not understandable reality in favor of disputes in science that can be settled by experience.

Kant's successors offer opposing idealisms. For Johann Gottlieb Fichte the ego is absolute reality and the I posits or creates nature as all that is not itself. Friedrich Schelling uses one of his several philosophical systems to suggest that nature creates subjectivity in order to become self-conscious. G. W. F. Hegel incorporates all the idealisms above into a historical process showing that reality is "subject as well as substance." Kant's antinomies are not the last but the first genuine statement of philosophy. Reason issues in contradictions because reality is a contradictory process. Spirit is the negative element, and truth is the whole together with the process of arriving at it like the total money for groceries is the abstract result for the many separate objects purchased. History is the

temporal process in which the real becomes rational and the rational becomes real.

Karl Marx earned a doctorate degree in philosophy and he was influenced by the idealist tradition from Kant through Hegel. But he replaced the epistemological claims of subjects and objects with a humanistic anthropology of embodied men in a material world living under the real necessity of producing and reproducing their existence. Marx's absolute is economic production and its capacity for revolutionary transformation. Man transforms nature through labor. But man, in turn, is transformed by nature. Marx's account of this transforming/transformed process is historical materialism. The end of history is a new human living in a communist society that ends class conflict and abolishes private property. In the new society the surplus profit from the production and sale of commodities is taken from the capitalist owners of industrial means of production and restored to workers who created its value. Boom and bust cycles caused by conflicts between capital and labor are the economic base that determines individual consciousnesses and superstructures of religion, philosophy, government, law and art. According to Rockmore, socialist realism is derived mainly drawn from Friedrich Engels' dialectical materialism. This reductionist aesthetic sees art as a passive reflection of actual historical conditions or creative propaganda about future tractor pulls. Contemporary Marxist aesthetics is significant and Rockmore discusses George Lukács and others.

There are several conclusions to Rockmore's historical and epistemological analysis of art and truth. The most significant is abandoning truth as universal and eternal. If all truths are merely contingent and finite then ontology can fall into nihilism and epistemology can become relativism. A worst case is the meaning of history. In the absence of complete truth, history cannot guarantee human continuation or even a reasonable outcome. The absence of absolute truth dethroned philosophy from its privileged position as guarantor of all lesser scientific, societal, and cultural truths. It took centuries of arguments to come to terms with the thought that there is no whole truth available to any man or historical period. Another conclusion is that none of the myriad arguments for mimesis, representation, or correspondence wins the prize. Logical constructions offered as criteria for truth that are based upon ideas designated as inside or outside human heads lack Cartesian indubitability. A final result is that aesthetics fared better in the loss of truth. Only in the heyday of

grand philosophical narratives was it assumed that artists needed truths imprimatur to create art. Currently representation has lost the philosophical argument and its possibility for interpreting art.

In the final chapter Rockmore considers contemporary philosophizing and aesthetics. If there is no universal truth it does not follow that there is no truth or meaning. Truth has to be re-defined as perspective, or contextual with hypo-theoretical, pragmatic, analytic, psychoanalytic, and artistic emphasis. Varieties of truth and meaning may force new ontological configurations. For example, Rockmore cites the Marxist Christopher Caudwell. His major work *Illusion and Reality* was first titled "Verse and Mathematics" and draft sketched a sort of Bergsonian aesthetic of two sources of knowledge. Later he came to think of ideas as illusions. Many ideas are goals, lures, values and desires in contrast with material reality. But in Caudwell's version of historical materialism illusions become reality through individual and collective action while realities like cultures die and become illusions.

Contemporary aesthetics divides cognitive or propositional knowledge from non-propositional but meaningful truths. For example, Phillip Larkin's poem "Aubade" catches an old man looking back on his life and seeing only regret for "the good not done, the love not given." Magritte's painting of a smoking pipe is titled "This is not a pipe." Art forces ordinary experience to feel, see, and say what could not be expressed scientifically.

*Art and Truth After Plato* provides us with a powerful historical and epistemological sweep. Time changes and past thoughts, art and history no longer satisfies the human needs it once did. This is not to say philosophy, art and history is over or done with, lost, or dead. Contemporary philosophizing and aesthetics frees man to know the truth of actual reality of this historical moment and no longer entangled by inherited dogmas and ideologies that Mrs. Gradgrind with her dying gasp described as "all those ologies."