



## Remarks about *Art and Truth After Plato* and Its Critics

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**Abstract:** Though it is sometimes said that the aesthetic tradition began in the eighteenth century, for cognitive purposes it began much earlier in Plato's suggestion, on cognitive grounds, that artists of all kinds must be expelled from the city. The post-Platonic aesthetic tradition can be reconstructed as a series of attempts over the intervening centuries to answer Plato, who has perhaps never been satisfactorily answered. This work considers selected latter responses to Plato's pioneering invention of aesthetics on the basis of the theory of forms. It further considers a number of related themes, including the decline of representation and the Hegelian thesis of the end of art in pointing to the still unresolved Platonic thesis concerning art and truth.

**Keywords:** Plato; Kant, Immanuel; philosophy of art; cognitive theory; transcendentals; historicism; aesthetics; empiricist; Marx, Karl; aesthetics; representation; mimesis.

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I have been asked to say a few words about how I came to write this book and what I think it accomplishes. I am glad to have this opportunity since it helps me to reflect on this part of my philosophical trajectory in examining the reasons known and perhaps unknown and even unknowable leading me in this direction.

Describing this book is not a simple task. In some ways this is obviously a study in theoretical aesthetics, though I have never been more than incidentally attracted to aesthetics as such. In other ways, this is a treatise in cognitive theory, masquerading as a work about aesthetics. It is clear that the main motivating factor leading to this work is my concern to pursue the cognitive problem in addressing the theme of art and truth. I have been interested in the cognitive dimension of German idealism taken in a wide sense over many years, in recent years increasingly as concerns the so-called Copernican revolution. I hold that representationalism is a main strand in

modern theory of knowledge. Though Immanuel Kant is still often understood as representationalist, and though he routinely employs representationalist vocabulary, above all the term *Vorstellung*, he in fact turns away from representationalism, which fails in any known formulation, and toward constructivism as an approach to cognition. One way to put this point is to say that Kant denies both intellectual intuition and representationalism in favor of the Copernican turn, which is in this sense a second best theory. I further believe that the effort to interpret, criticize and reformulate Kantian constructivism is a leading theme throughout post-Kantian German idealism. I finally think that a constructivist approach to cognition links together Kant and post-Kantian German idealism.

This book carries my interest in idealist epistemology back to its origins in early Greek philosophy. At the dawn of the Western tradition, Parmenides suggests that thinking and being are the same. This view,

which echoes through the tradition, leads to what later became metaphysical realism. Platonism can be read as asserting an ontological causal relation between forms and objects—since objects supposedly participate in forms—but as denying the "backward" anti-Platonic epistemological inference from objects to forms, hence as denying representationalism.

I believe that Kant signals in the *First Critique* that he considers himself to be a Platonist (B 370). The critical philosophy can be understood as refusing both intellectual intuition, on which Plato relies, and, following him, representationalism, in turning to constructivism, or the view that we know only what we in some sense construct. Hence Kant can be said to propose a solution to the cognitive problem in following Plato's proscription of representation while further rejecting the Platonic appeal to intuition. This line of reasoning led me directly from German idealism to ancient Greek philosophy, more precisely to Plato's rejection of mimesis, and, by extension, representation in all its forms.

When aesthetics begins depends on how one understands the term. Many observers think aesthetics came into being about the time the modern usage of the term emerged. It is sometimes said that the aesthetics tradition begins in Kant or at least in Alexander Baumgarten. On the contrary, I believe that there is a highly interesting aesthetics debate that is already underway in Plato's concern with knowledge, that is quickly joined by Aristotle, and that runs throughout the tradition up to and then beyond the point at which it may or may not later have begun in the eighteenth century.

Plato's influence on philosophy in general and Western aesthetics in particular is obviously immense. I do not believe the history of Western philosophy can be reduced to footnotes to Plato. Yet I do think the entire later aesthetics tradition can be reconstructed as a series of efforts to answer Plato in either railing against, or in accepting his view of the relation of art and art objects of the most varied kinds and truth. Now the Platonic view of aesthetics is not itself well understood. In my view, it is a mistake to think that Plato simply rejects art in all its forms, if for no other reason because critique supposes a positive standard. The *Republic* can be interpreted, not merely as a fantasy, but rather as Plato's effort to sketch the outlines of a state, which would be good, based on truth, or true, and even beautiful, perhaps even the only such object. In the book I examine selected aesthetic theories in terms of the central theme of art and truth

as well as a few of the many problems associated with this theme.

What do I think this book accomplishes? It is awkward for me to evaluate my own effort other than to say that at least I learned something in the process of writing even if no one else would. It is clear that the scope of the discussion is limited since I was more interested in pursuing some key moments than a possible encyclopedic treatment. I did not try to fill in the whole picture, even in outline. In this instance, more would probably not have been better, even if it had contributed to my education.

One intention is to overcome the artificial separation between philosophy and aesthetics. We live in a period in which it is thought to be useful to concentrate as narrowly as possible on a single author, a single book, even a single theme. One can imagine that today when jobs are scarce a Plato, a Kant, or a Hegel would have been told that if tenure were still possible when he had accrued enough teaching experience, he would do well to work in a single sharply defined domain. Rightly or wrongly I like to think of myself as a generalist concerned to pursue philosophical concerns wherever they might lead. In this case, it seems to me that there is a genuine aesthetic side to cognitive concerns and that cognition and aesthetics should not be understood separately but in tandem.

A second intention is to clarify certain aspects of the German idealist approach to cognition in turning to the views of Kant, Friedrich Schelling, G. F. W. Hegel, Karl Marx and Marxism. Alone among the great German idealists, Johann Gottlieb Fichte does not write on aesthetics. I hold, though I cannot argue the point here, that if constructivism is central to German idealism, that, since Marx is a constructivist, Marx is also a German idealist. Hence a treatment of German idealist aesthetics needs to discuss Marxian and Marxist aesthetics, which was not too long ago one of the most interesting aspects of Marxism.

A third aim is to determine if at this late date, when there is considerable attention to how to understand a work of art, we can make progress on the very different theme of the link between art and truth. The book identifies two anti-Platonic claims for art as a window on reality so to speak: the medieval view of art, on the one hand, and the Marxist view of art, on the other. It is without question clear that for the medieval mind the world is the creation of and in a sense the road back to God. In the Middle Ages those who could not read could however read the stained glass windows of the

great cathedrals as a clue to transcendent reality. For Marxism, but not for Marx, art, or at least a certain form of art turning on socialist realism pierces the veil of capitalist illusion to reveal a world created not by God but by men and women. This is somewhat different from the Marxian view that we can know the world because we construct it through our activity, above all our economic activity.

Further, this book strengthens my conviction that Kant, who is often read through David Hume, less often through Gottfried Leibniz, Christian Wolff or even René Descartes, can profitably be understood from a Platonic perspective. In particular, one can say that Plato's effort to drive a wedge between art and truth as usually understood is extended in Kant's view that tortured view that art is non-cognitive.

Finally the book identifies a third idealist view associated with Hegel, according to whose form of constructivism we come to consciousness and self-consciousness in and through what we do, both in making objects to be sold in the market place and in the interaction with others. In this way, Hegel reverses the relation of subject and object, for instance through art. For Hegel, the problem is not, as was already the case for Plato, whether we do or even might know reality but rather to understand that through art we come to know ourselves.

I have somewhat immodestly endeavored to point out some of the things I may have accomplished or at least tried to do in the book. It remains to see through your reaction the extent to which one can honestly say that any of the things I tried to accomplish was actually successfully carried out.

### To My Critics

It is a given that philosophy depends on interpretation but we do not know how to interpret. I am clearly lucky in my critics, since each of them labors to describe a book, which each, somewhat like the blind man and the elephant, understands differently. Since my critics each see a somewhat different book, it will be helpful to treat their remarks separately.

In a book of this kind, which centers on pursuing the later ramifications of a single main theme beginning in Plato throughout the post-Platonic debate, clearly one needs to pick and choose among the vast number of themes and writers who for one reason or another I did not see fit to include, either because of my own ignorance or the limits at my disposal. No one can say

everything, and in trying to say even part of what needs to be said one often risks surpassing the tolerance of even a very generous university press.

Sophie Cloutier picks up on this limit in pointing, legitimately in my view, to something I left out. She notes the importance of Hannah Arendt's conferences on Kant's political philosophy in suggesting that. Though the main focus lies in finding an example for political judgment, in the process of developing her point Arendt addresses the social function of art in what Cloutier calls "the emergence of the common world." She further notes that Arendt insists on translating *allgemein* by general and not universal. And she finally notes that the norm is not truth, but *sensus communis* in the sense of a shared world.

In response, I think Arendt's proposed translation is important not only for Kant, but also, for instance, in avoiding attributing a universalist posture to someone like Hegel, who through translation or even mistranslation is often naturalized as an English-speaking author in reading *Geist* as "mind," *allgemein* as "universal," and so on. Yet this is perhaps more problematic as concerns Kant, whose *a priori* claims are certainly intended to be universal, not general. One senses there is an equivocation or at least uncertainty in the Kantian view of aesthetics since he gives up the *a priori* for the *a posteriori* while nonetheless striving to maintain universality on which he elsewhere insists.

It is certainly correct that *sensus communis* presupposes a shared world. Yet there is a tension in the Kantian conception since he apparently believes that aesthetic judgment is not independent of, but rather at least partly dependent on, membership in different groups. Let me give an example. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in the account of "The Ideal of Beauty (§17)," Kant claims that what we take as an instance of the physical beauty of a human being or even a dog depends on the ethnic group to which one happens to belong. This suggests that the so-called common world is common to members of one ethnic group but not, say, to another, which in turn undermines the view that our aesthetic judgments lead to or point toward a common world as well as the implicit suggestion that they are correct across the board. The central idea seems to be that for Kant, who distinguishes between ideas and ideals, our aesthetic criteria include ideas borrowed from experience that in some sense depend on who we are, including membership in a particular nationality or ethnic group, and so on, while the aesthetic ideal is based on aesthetic reason. Yet if ideas basically differ, either

we agree with respect to ideals, which seems unlikely even within a particular group, or the *sensus communis* in question is not general but rather local. Though for Arendt art is a way to humanize our world, it seems less clear this is a basic aspect of the Kantian message.

I find myself in large agreement with Alina Feld. She captures very well the distinction between the Platonic approach to art, which derives from its role with respect to truth, which if there is knowledge, must be based on direct intuition of the forms, and the Aristotelian reorientation of the aesthetic dimension toward imitating human reality. In the transition from Plato to Aristotle, "imitation" takes on a different referent, as a result of which what was impossible in the Platonic scheme becomes eminently possible.

Feld is also perceptive as concerns the difference between Hegel and Arthur Danto's depiction of Hegel. Hegel's view of art turns on its historical character, which changes as a consequence of the increasing secularization of the modern world. One is struck by Hegel's enormously insightful grasp of the consequences for the aesthetic domain at the beginning of the nineteenth century of the secular transformation then underway. This is a brilliant illustration of his view that philosophy itself is its own time captured in thought.

Danto, who presents his view as if it were not only inspired by, but also based on Hegel's, is in fact interested in a different theme. His position turns, as Feld points out, on the decline of the conceptual guidelines which over centuries guided aesthetic production, and which, through the mutation of art into an almost innumerable flowering of different styles calls into question the distinction between art and non-art. This theme, which is presented under the cover of a proposed reading of Hegel, and which is linked to such later artists as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and others, has no obvious link with Hegel at all. Feld puts the point very well in contrasting the distinction between the role of art in an increasingly secular world and the very existence of art, which is a wholly different concern.

I agree as well that in a certain sense Hegel is the successor of Aristotle in the aesthetic domain. Aristotle, who already turns attention from the forms to ourselves, has no sense of the importance of history, which emerges only later in the tradition, and is perhaps best represented by Hegel. The latter's insight that we know ourselves in a historical context is important, which, in the general turn of philosophy in the twentieth century away from history, risks being lost and has certainly been obscured.

Finally I agree with Feld's point that cognitive representationalism has failed and that, for that reason, constructivism increasingly seems justified. The problem, which goes back in the tradition at least to Parmenides, consists in the persistent conceptual delusion that to know means to grasp mind-independent reality as it is, in one version in what is often called metaphysical realism. This view has been pursued over some two and a half millennia without any progress at all. Kant, who is best known for his resolute *a priorism*, in the last quarter of the eighteenth century already noted the interest of giving up the unavailing effort to conform knowledge to objects in favor of the experiment of basing objects on the structure of the human mind. Though there are occasional writers interested in constructivism, important forces are arrayed against this idea. The widespread failure to investigate this approach with more energy can be at least partially attributed to the abiding force of the Parmenidean myth consisting in the grasp of reality as well as the enormous hesitancy of the philosophical corporation in breaking from historically-favored models.

Raymond Langley comes to my book through the prism of Marx and his epigones, a theme he knows exceedingly well. His remarks on Christopher Caudwell, one of the most interesting Marxist writers, but who has almost entirely been swallowed up by history, are, as the saying goes, worth the price of admission. *Illusion and Reality*, Caudwell's most important work, has been much neglected in Marxist aesthetics. Naturally anyone who has dipped into Marx and Marxism is aware that this entire area is fraught with controversy. The history of Marxism is replete with arguments that have been lost on political grounds and as a consequence lives have also been lost. One might be hesitant to accept the label "historical materialism" if only because this term has often been applied indiscriminately to both Marx and Marxism, for instance by Jürgen Habermas, on the mistaken premise that, as Engels claims, there is only a single theory that both share. This myth, which Friedrich Engels, Marx's closest associate, created, continues to impede any effort to consider Marx's theories as serious contributions to philosophy.

Langley points out that in a sense the end of history, or at least the history of capitalism, would be a new communist society without private property. Yet as Marx suggests this would also be the beginning of human history, the period in which human beings would finally come into their own in developing their

capacities as human individuals. Whether this is really possible is something that we simply cannot know by merely thinking about it, since fundamental historical change can only come about in human history. It is, hence, more than questionable if the profits are to be returned to the workers, that anyone would want to continue to exercise the classical capitalist role, whose main interest lies in arrogating an unfair share to oneself.

Langley mentions the reductive Marxist aesthetic based on so-called socialist realism as the officially approved model. This calls for three points. To begin with, it is unclear, though Marxist aesthetics has been a fruitful domain, that Marx was ever persuaded of the fruitfulness of aesthetic realism. Second, the imposition of political criteria in the aesthetic domain has led to a certain sterility, for instance, interest in Maxim Gorkij rather than Boris Pasternak, Mikhail Sholokhov rather than Joseph Brodsky. Yet clearly Samuel Beckett in his own way, who for Györgi Lukács is a social degenerate, is as great an author as either Marcel Proust or Honoré de Balzac. Finally, the dogma of the reflection theory of knowledge, which finds no trace in Marx, but is accorded favored status by Engels, Vladimir Lenin and later "official" Marxists, comes up against its limits in the difficulty of making sense of the view that art reflects society. To use Langley's phrase, creative propaganda about tractor pulls simply cannot be the aesthetic standard if aesthetics is to survive in a meaningful sense.

Langley's parting remarks about the lessons of my book are well taken. Langley apparently sees dire consequences if we fall into relativism. I see no way to avoid it, though the argument about how to formulate and defend relativism, two themes, which seem scarcely to have advanced since Plato, is far from settled. Yet I agree that at this late date a representational approach to knowledge seems increasingly indefensible. I am convinced that a consequence of the shift to a constructive form of epistemology is to abandon the ancient search for certainty based on the Parmenidean insight that we must grasp what is as it is. The outcome of this debate over several millennia seems to be that we can know only that no road leads from here to there. Hence we need to abandon that fruitless search in accepting a lesser claim, but which is not tantamount to skepticism unless, even after giving up perfect knowledge as our goal, like Richard Rorty, we continue to accept it as our cognitive criterion.

In his remarks, Joseph Margolis pays me the favor of taking up and carrying further the implications of my book. Margolis is certainly right that, unlike Plato,

I think that there is no reason to deny art a role in the *Bildung* of mankind. Yet I believe there is every reason to deny that through art or in some other post-Platonic way we can limn reality. I also think there is every reason to draw on the resources art places at our disposal, in Margolis' words, for conveying the evolving truth of that world we construct. This important insight needs to be emphasized. Hegel is often wrongly thought to turn away from art, which in the meantime has lost its interest or relevance, whereas this is not the view he is advancing. Nor is Hegel indicating that, as Danto seems to claim in his German predecessor's name, that the multiplicity of styles means it is no longer possible, if it was ever possible, to distinguish between art and non-art.

Margolis says he is inclined to begin where my own discussion ends. That is certainly fair enough in that the debate advances in building on earlier views. This point is consistent with my view of my effort less as even the beginning of an aesthetic theory than as an effort to follow a debate, which begins outside of but then in early Greek philosophy lead into aesthetics through Plato's intervention and echoed through the later discussion. In that specific sense, what I have to say in this book is indeed a corollary to a larger undertaking. Hence I concede the point that my book is not intended to and certainly does not offer anything like an adequate theory of the arts, or in Margolis' language an adequate theory of which meanings or meaningful structures may be rightly ascribed to artworks.

Naturally I am aware that some observers have discussed this and related themes, but, I must confess, I am unaware there is any adequate theory of what it means for something, say in Platonic terms an appearance to represent something else, say, still in Platonic terms, reality. Those who, such as Nelson Goodman, have tried to solve this enigma can be read as saying there is no obvious solution, and perhaps no solution at all. This leads me to agree with Margolis that in this book my focus is what he calls licit forms of knowledge, but not the theory of art. Yet it is unclear to me that in saying this I am disagreeing with, to take his examples, either Plato or Lukács, both of whom can be read as neglecting the theory of art for an account of art's cognitive role.

Margolis' parting point touches on a central philosophical theme. If I understand him correctly, he thinks that as concerns art and truth either we explain everything or nothing at all. Yet this maximalist approach seems beyond what is possible. Holism, which

can only be a regulative idea, cannot be constitutive. For my part, I prefer to explain Plato's position the debate it has engendered while leaving the further work others more ambitious than myself. Though I acknowledge the importance of the enterprise, I did not intend, and do not see why I should have desired, within the limits I fixed for myself in this study, to solve the problem of

a theory of art.

In closing, I would like to thank my commentators, each of whom usefully casts light from a different perspective and in a generous way that can only advance the debate on an effort to continue a part of the debate that was joined by Plato and his students so many centuries ago.