

ART, TRUTH, AND KNOWLEDGE

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Philosophers have been suspicious of art from the start. It was Heraclitus who recommended that Homer should be thrown out of the games and flogged. The primary question for philosophy, until recently, has been, "What is reality and how do we come to know it?" Art and aesthetic experience have been regarded as modes of imitation, deception and imagination rather than as modes of reality, truth and knowledge. It was this very distinction which not only allowed philosophy to distinguish itself from *mythos*, but which gave rise to modern science itself. Today, our standard of truth lies with science, experimental inquiry and the fruits of technology. The thought that art has anything relevant to say about the truth of reality strikes us as jejune enthusiasm. For the most part, it does not occur to us that "art," "philosophy," or "science" are categories which did not apply to the ways humans divided up their worlds for thousands of years. The question I mean to raise here is whether we should keep questions of art and aesthetic experience so separated from questions of truth or reality. I will argue, in fact, that there is a sense of truth and reality most appropriately encountered through the question of art.

First, let us dismiss shallow popular misconceptions. It is rare today that we go to a concert, a museum or a gallery with the expectation of being well-informed when we leave, unless we are social historians or trend followers or even artists ("I always wondered how Casals would interpret that passage in the Brahms cello sonata"). It is not so rare to run across an artist who believes he or she has something true to say. Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* is meant to state a truth about the real world. So, in a less literal way, were the novels of Dickens and Zola. Eisenstein saw himself as an artist who had to convey the truths of Marxism just as the anonymous medieval sculptor or painter understood his work as the conveyance of Christian truth. Yet, we value Eisenstein for his cinematic power of expression rather than for his message. The abandoned baby carriage wheeling madly down the Odessa steps amid the fallen, bleeding bodies while the relentless shadows of the leveled rifles advance is as expressive of senseless violence and oppressive regimes as is Goya's famous painting of the executions of Spanish civilians by Napoleon's soldiers, "The Third of May." Both these works express recognizable human values which the artists wanted us to feel, and which they communicated with compelling technique. Were Eisenstein not Eisenstein, Goya not Goya, we might feel human sympathy but not aesthetic absorption. Thus, even with artists who under-

stood their art to be in the service of an idea, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Blake or Eliot, we listen to them, behold their work, for other reasons.

Moreover, one can point today to numerous artists and works of art which seem avidly to deny carrying any "message." The calm purity of a Mondrian, the wild, harnessed explosions of a Pollack only say: Behold! What is one to make of piles of bricks, filled-in trenches, floors covered with ping-pong balls and other excuses for art? Whatever else they may be, they certainly are rejections of the notion of a socially imposed conception of "fine art." Not only does art not have to have any social message or purpose, it does not even have to look like "art." At this extreme, art can only be negatively defined, not this, not that. Individualism by nihilism may be another way of putting it.

Thus, the idea that art must have something to do with the truth or reality seems at best an antiquated and dubious claim. There are, in addition, good philosophical arguments against the thesis. Douglas Morgan, that rarity in our profession, an elegant, humane thinker, lucidly discusses these in his article, "Must Art Tell the Truth?"¹ Morgan sees our culture suffering from "truth addiction." That is, in our fear and admiration of science we have come to value anything and everything, including art and religion, for their cognitive content. Morgan argues against this because not only do we thereby make art subservient to science, but fail to appreciate it for what it genuinely can give. "The fine arts," says Morgan, "are adventures that deserve to be taken seriously. To subordinate them to the sciences . . . is to take each art less than seriously (p. 21). We are creatures of delight, feeling and complex emotion and these qualities have their own intrinsic worth. Moreover, there are many worthless insipid and trivial "truths" and many worthwhile, profound and significant feelings. "Headpieces can be filled with straw truths," advises Morgan, "as well as with wise ones." (p. 21).

I will not explore the ways in which truth and art intermingle according to Morgan. For example, works of art may inform us about the society in which they were created just as information about the society or artist may help us understand the work. But neither of these is what art is all about. If we allow the idea of truth to infect our view of art, we are at best winning a Pyrrhic victory. Either we run the risk of admitting that the "truth" of one work of art negates its contradictory (e.g. if *Candide* is true, then *War and Peace* is false), or we uselessly muddy up the meaning of the term "truth." On this second "solution," we will constantly have to distinguish scientific truth from truth in its artistic, Pickwickian sense.

Morgan concludes his article with a tantalizing concession, however. If we must demand that art provide knowledge, to save its dignity from being equated with push-pin (or Pac-Man), there is a "second meaning for knowledge, and one which, unlike the scientific-informational sense, bears cen-

tral, direct, and healthy relevance to the making and loving of works of art."

This is . . . the now archaic sense in which knowledge is identical with intimacy and possession. . . . 'And Adam knew Eve,' the Mosaic author of Genesis tells us in the story of the Fall. . . . If we were to consider 'And Adam knew Eve' externally, and read it as merely one more possibly historic report . . . we should have to take it as either informational true or informational-false to be verified or . . . disconformed by a trivialization. . . . So, too, with the seeing and hearing of art. We who participate in art—and I use the word participate advisedly to carry along its sense of sharing—may indeed know-about a great deal . . . in order to enter into a work of art. But once we are in it, as when we listen with all our might to the movement of the music, we can be said to know only in the Biblical way: to know by sympathetic union with what is known. . . . This intimate, participative sense of being is a far truer guide to God and art than any cognition can ever be (p. 27).

The richness of this passage bears close attention. When the prophet Hosea said that Yahweh demanded not sacrifices but "knowledge" (*da'at*), he meant participation and personal involvement with the meaning of the teaching given to the Hebrews. We can distinguish, then, knowledge-about from what might be best called "understanding." Knowledge-about is external, informational and manipulatory. Understanding is interpersonal, expressive and participatory.²

Morgan, unfortunately, did not develop this pregnant insight. He does leave a clue which saves this idea from its mystical overtones. Morgan, with John Dewey, locates the origin of art in the full sensory participation of the organism with its surroundings, i.e. the full or funded "lived experience."

I begin where art begins: in organic, human sensation, in seeing and hearing. These, our best-developed and most characteristically human sense organs, we use along with touch and taste as our primitive avenues for contact with the world within us. As I see you and hear you and perhaps touch your hand, I know you in a basic human sense of "know." Every healthy baby revels as an animal in the sensory exploration of the mysteries that surround him; as he hears, sees touches, tastes, he grows and adapts creatively, and gradually learns to become human. (Morgan, p. 19).

The value of art lies in the fact that it can awaken this full involvement, the total use of our senses in which the world and we unite and expand, never to be the same again. This is the primordial way we know; any knowledge-

about, any dexterity in manipulating tools or symbols, evolves from this totality and depends upon it. As Dewey constantly insisted, science, too, is part of life and cannot and should not seek to escape its humanity. There is nothing wrong with pausing from the onward rush of experience to analyze, discriminate and develop techniques. The danger lies in separating these techniques from the lifeworld in which they arise and function.

Morgan preferred to keep the question of truth and knowledge confined to the methods and limits of modern scientific inquiry and logical analysis. Dewey, too, was unwilling to ascribe truth-value to art, though he did insist that art dealt with a special sort of meaning. Cognitive theories of art, according to Dewey, all too easily abandoned the intrinsic value of the aesthetic experience for some pet metaphysical system.³ Yet, both Dewey and Morgan are deeply committed to the significance of art as an alternative means of being with the world meaningfully and humanly and not as a mere mindless mute emotive ejaculation. Given this, I think there is an important and fundamental sense in connecting the question of art with that of truth and reality.

The connection of art with truth and reality or Being should bring to mind Heidegger's Promethean essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art."⁴ Though to many Heidegger may seem to have verified Morgan's fears about taking truth in a mystical, poetic and Pickwickian way, muddying the term hopelessly, he does agree at least with Morgan's view that if there is truth in art, it certainly is not propositional verification. I cannot even attempt to summarize this obscure Teutonic masterpiece—others have ably done so in any case,⁵ but certain major themes can be isolated.

Heidegger not only states that art is associated with truth and Being, but it is essentially grounded in them. Art is the happening of truth, the manifestation of Being. Truth is not propositional correspondence with fact, nor is it coherence, nor is it even "warranted assertability." Truth is disclosure, the revelation of something in the light of its Being. Before truth meant "correct judgment" or "correspondence," it meant *being true* (OE: *treow*; OHG: *triuwa*, "faith, covenant"): Our word "verify," like German *wahr*, or Latin *verus*, meant "to be truthful" in the sense of keeping faith or swearing honestly before a court long before it became associated with laboratory or logical verification.⁶ Heidegger, of course, goes to the Greek *alētheia*, "un-hiddenness" or "un-forgetfulness." Heidegger is wrong, I think, to interpret this as "manifestness;" that is, he takes it too "phenomenologically," too visually.⁷ *Alethes* refers to someone who is "open," i.e. honest, truthful, dependable, one who keeps oaths. *Pseudes*, its contrary, means one who is deceitful or false, like cunning Odysseus and his "liar's tales."⁸

For Heidegger, art illuminates and opens up human existence; it is an event which constitutes us in a primary or primordial way. We would never

engage in scientific research if we were not, underneath, oriented toward the world as a place where truth could happen. In other words, our existence is open to the world as the possibility of truth. We may discover something we had not totally expected, but we would not have if we were not in some way prepared to notice and encounter it. Likewise, we could not learn what telling the truth is without discovering what it is to lie. Every culture and every world-view orients itself toward truth. This may be through ceremony, ritual, sacred myth and initiation, but this orientation defines the values and meanings of that culture. To come of age means to understand and acknowledge those true meanings which abide and constitute the world-view of the culture. Humans are worlded beings; we participate in universes of valued meanings.

Art arises through our meaningful involvement with the world and it brings that world out of the hidden, habitual everyday concerns into vivid engagement. The work stops us, makes us care about it and makes us aware. On the one hand, Heidegger says, it brings forth "the world," the domain of cultural meanings in which we participate. On the other hand, it makes "the earth" apparent, i.e. it lets the qualities of nature stand out simply as they are: stone, sound, color, etc. Heidegger's example of the Greek temple illustrates this. The temple focuses and realizes all the meanings of the culture connected with it: birth, hope, fear, joy, victory, defeat and death. It also realizes by its very being the ground, the mountains, wind, light, sky, the marble stone, and space itself.⁹ As Morgan (and as Dewey) said, art invites us to full awareness of our participatory nature with the world. We "know" in the Biblical sense.

The work of art is therefore not a thing, an object. It is a *work* or a participatory event. In every work there is a tension and an ambiguity. A work successfully achieves balances and brings together the elements, but as it does so it closes off alternative ways. As Heidegger puts it, every truth (or disclosure) comes about through untruth (closure). The work of art, then, embodies a tension (which Heidegger calls the "strife" of earth and world) and makes a demand on us. If the work were so bland as not to challenge, it would simply remain an unnoticed piece of cultural furniture. If it were so radically different as not even to appear as a work of art, it might startle us, but would not mean anything outside of a momentary surprise or puzzlement. It, too, might not even be perceived. The work must unite this tension and through it stand forth to challenge us, make us aware and make us participate with it. Works call for understanding and interpretation because they disclose truth, the truth of our Being-in-the-world.

Nietzsche said there were no facts, only interpretations. Every human life, every artwork, every culture is an interpretation. We are creatures which demand that the world have both value and meaning, and everything

from myths to philosophy and science attest to that drive. These meanings are not to be understood primarily as lexical or logical meanings; they are lived meanings expressed in a variety of ways, nonlinguistically as well as linguistically. A bison on a cave wall, an act of heroism, an arrangement of spring blossoms, the sipping of tea, a lullaby—these are encountered meanings. Most of the time, we are involved with momentary concerns of no ulterior significance; we live abstracted from full participation with the world. "Art" stands for those events which recall us to the fullness of our being, our sense of the meaning of things, the awareness of truth.

The truth of art recalls, then, "truth" as keeping faith. The child learns that he can depend on parents; what they say is "true" and can be trusted. We learn which objects and actions also are dependable. A weak chair, a dull blade, a secret told to a gossip, eating a jar of sweets, these prove to be false and untrustworthy. It is only late in life that we try to think of "truth" as some sort of logical correspondence of proposition and fact. Yet even here, what is this correspondence but a dependability on the nature of things in the context of inquiry, "warranted assertibility"?

How is a work of art true?

A work of art invites us toward participatory engagement. It promises us that, by interacting with it, we will be fulfilled with that sense of significance and meaning which is part of our innermost being. Our "understanding" will have grown; we will have encountered the world on that primary level of "knowledge" in the Biblical sense. If the work fulfills this promise (provided we, too, have "worked"), then the work has been true. Great works of art abide in culture because they are dependable sources for such consummatory experiences. But we, too, must be true to the work of art. We must experience and interpret in a faithful manner. This is why writers often speak of art as giving us "self-understanding." We do not literally come to identify ourselves with the work, except pathologically. Our capacity to understand, our awareness and sense of meaning, our participation with life have expanded. We have been called upon to live creatively and significantly.

Too often, when we think of the world as presented by science, we think of external fixed systems of facts. Though the world of modern physics seems incredibly dynamic, "facts" connote for us something dead, something achieved, finished, definite, over and done with—something "made," *factum*. Fact hardly connotes a creative nature with impending novelty, as Whitehead speculated. When we conceive of the world as a system of "facts," then it becomes easy to see why art and the aesthetic experience, which summon up our own creativity, seem even more isolated from the scientific universe. I suppose it is this view of nature as composed of facts which made Heidegger and his followers emphatic in their anti-scientific stance and which made the positivists equally emphatic in their rejection of

existential-phenomenology. Yet, creativity is a fact of human life. It is not some sort of supernatural power which sets us over against nature. Dewey even states that in human creativity, that is, in art, nature itself comes to fulfillment.¹⁰ Aesthetic-artistic participation does reveal something about the reality of the world. When true art happens, it happens within nature, not without nature. Likewise, true science is creative and interpretative; the "correctness" of its propositions depends on the broader, adventurous and ambiguous nature of human inquiry itself as a meaning-giving context.

Both artist and beholder are participants in the most dramatic human activity: creation and interpretation. Morgan was right in pointing to the full totality of involvement with the world through art which is so different from acquiring a trivial truth in logic, but perhaps he was too hasty in reserving the meaning of truth to the correspondence of proposition with fact. The sort of "knowledge" he refers to, *da'at*, "understanding," may be the source of our knowledge in a more specialized sense. Indeed, Dewey's interpretation of logic and scientific inquiry was directed toward reaffirming the founding of these disciplines within the broader contexts of human life. Scientific truth only happens within the matrix of social actions and cultural meanings. Heidegger pointed out that understanding (*Verstehen*) is more primary and existential than "explanation" (*Erklären*). All meaning relies ultimately upon human existence and its involvement in the world. This involvement, moreover, is creative and interpretive, and this is what is called forth by the work of art.

Thus, in conclusion, I would like to suggest that Morgan and Dewey should not have so readily dismissed the question of truth, knowledge and reality from that of art and aesthetic experience. Before life is diced up and compartmentalized, it is whole. Heidegger is wrong, on the other hand, to place poetic understanding in opposition to scientific explanation. This has led his follower, Gadamer, to divorce truth entirely from method. Interpretation must have a sense of the whole before it can discriminate the part, but it can only arrive at a valid, workable conclusion by allowing the parts to be methodically mediated.

The truth of art, like that of science, is a human truth. Both have their origin in trust, care and participation. Science is also a moral discipline, as is art. Through science, we have come to try to learn the divisions, organizations and relations in nature. But we, who interpret nature, are not simple "data." We are active, unfinished beings who mean, know and understand, who are attempting in living to fulfill values and be true. Art calls us to this task of the joyful immediacy, the encircling ambiguity and the inescapable involvement of life itself.

NOTES

1. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 26.
2. Initially one might seek to make this distinction between knowledge-about and "acquaintance-with," as did William James (*Principles of Psychology*, I, p. 221). Indeed in

Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* we read, regarding acquaintance-with as "acknowledgement," that "The immediacy involved is that of intimate connection with emotion and action," (p. 152). Dewey, like James, goes on to equate this form with "passing familiarity," which of course can be routine and shallow. Hence it seems best to me, for describing the experience Morgan is talking about, to call it "understanding." Naturally this suggests the role of *Verstehen* in contemporary hermeneutics, and there are important differences between this term and the connotations of "understanding" in English. See Palmer's *Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 130.

3. See *Art as Experience*, Chapter XII.

4. "The Origin of the Work of Art," translated by Albert Hofstadter in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 15-88. All references will be to this edition.

5. See Hans Jaeger, "Heidegger and the Work of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 27, and Eugene Kaelin, "Notes toward an Understanding of Heidegger's Aesthetics," in *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Edward Lee and Maurice Mandelbaum, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1967).

6. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "verify," and the Indo-European *weros*, "faith, pledge," in *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

7. See Jaspers' criticism in *Plato*, Vol. I, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1969), Chapter XI.

8. See Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, "*alētheia*," "*alēthes*," and "*pseudes*."

9. See "*The Origin of the Work of Art*," pp. 41 ff.

10. See *Experience and Nature*, Chapter IX and pp. xv-xvi.