

# SELECTED PAPERS FROM THE XXIII WORLD CONGRESS OF PHILOSOPHY

## REMARKS ON ART, TRUTH, AND CULTURE

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**ABSTRACT:** Plato both created the Western aesthetic tradition and rejected the artistic claim to truth. I suggest that Plato's rejection of the view that non-philosophical art is true gave rise to a debate later traversing the entire Western aesthetic tradition. I further suggest that the post-Platonic Western aesthetic tradition can be reconstructed as an effort by many hands to come to grips with and if possible overturn the Platonic judgment. I finally suggest that Hegel, in disagreeing with both Kant and Plato, presents an interesting anti-Platonic argument for "reforging" as it were the ancient link between art and truth. For in the final analysis, art, or at least some kinds of art, is not only beautiful but also in a deep sense true.

WHAT "art" means is culture specific, hence not universal at all. In the West, until roughly the seventeenth century "art" referred, as the Greek term "techne" suggests, to skill or mastery, which was viewed as continuous with crafts and science. But more recently the term "fine arts" has come to refer to aesthetic considerations, as distinguished from so-called decorative or applied arts.

In some cultures and at some times art is accorded a cognitive dimension. The Western concern with knowledge central to the entire philosophical tradition is atypical in three ways. To begin with, there is the attention to beauty. Second, there is the link between beauty and truth, which is forged early in the tradition. Finally, there is the characteristic view of truth as universal and necessary.

On some readings Plato can be taken to suggest that the ideal state incarnates all three characteristics. Yet it is not clear that the true is good, nor the good beautiful, nor even that the beautiful is true.

The relation of the art and truth however understood echoes through the post-Platonic tradition. Plato inaugurates Western aesthetics in suggesting two points: art and art objects of the most varied kind and truth as he understands it are inseparable, and artists do not and cannot know the truth.

The theme of art and truth continues to attract attention. Opinions are divided among artists, who think philosophers know little of artistic relevance, and philosophers, who think artists do not understand what they do. For every Cézanne, who claims there is truth in art and intends to show it, there is a Picasso who insists art is a lie. Plato's view that non-philosophical artists do not and cannot know is supported much later by Kant's conviction that art depends on taste, which is unrelated to knowledge. Yet such surprising bedfellows as medieval thinkers, Marxists and in our own time Heidegger share the anti-Platonic view that art, or at least a certain kind of art, can tell us about reality.

The Western artistic tradition can be reconstructed as a series of responses to the theme of the relation of art and truth. The Platonic view, for instance, can be restated as a series of related claims: first, art must grasp what is, not merely as it appears or seems to be, but rather as it is. Second, art is, hence, linked to cognition. It follows that as concerns this theme there is no difference, none at all, between aesthetics and philosophy. Third, cognition is understood here on a quasi-Parmenidean model ultimately based on the identity of thought and being. Fourth, there is a basic distinction between appearance and reality. Fifth, artists cannot know since no cognitive inference is possible from appearance to reality. Sixth, if there is knowledge, there is direct, intuitive knowledge of what is. And, seventh, some selected individuals, call them philosophers, have direct, intuitive knowledge of what is. Hence they satisfy the criterion of knowledge of the real as a prerequisite to art, which is both beautiful as well as true, hence presumably useful for the good life.

It is sometimes claimed that aesthetics only begins in Kant. Yet clearly early in the tradition Plato puts forward an aesthetic theory, which deserves our attention and which continues to reverberate throughout the later debate. This complex series of related claims justifies Plato's criticism of the art of his time, which he rejects as falsely mimetic since it cannot know what it depicts. It is perhaps less widely known that Plato's critique of the art of his time presupposes a positive conception of art as well as his notorious theory of forms.

Plato's objection consists in claiming that ordinary art falsely claims to represent what it cannot know, hence cannot represent. The art of Plato's time was mimetic. Mimesis is a particularly rigorous form of representation, which reaches its high point in reflection, or the so-called reflection theory of knowledge, which is a staple of Marxism, but was already anticipated by Socrates. Plato attacks mimetic art and by implication all representational approaches to cognition.

Plato's attack on mimetic art, which is not motivated by cognitive skepticism, presupposes cognitive intuition. In Plato's hands, an intuitive approach to knowledge, which maintains the Parmenidean criterion of the identity of thought and being, further presupposes direct realism. In the modern tradition, direct realism, sometimes also called naïve realism, is regarded as problematic for a number of reasons. On the one hand, direct realist claims, which are intuitive, are private, not public. The modern debate prefers public over private claims. On the other hand, there is the familiar problem of illusion, which takes many forms, such as the distinction between waking and sleeping discussed by Descartes.

In the modern tradition representationalism is widely favored as part of the anti-Platonic revival of a non-Platonic theory of knowledge. The modern debate on representationalism presupposes a two-fold reversal of Platonism. To begin with, it presupposes a reversal of the Platonic interdiction of cognitive inference from appearance to reality. Second, representationalism makes a qualified return to causality as an epistemological principle. In a causal theory of perception, the cognitive object is regarded as the cause of which the idea in the mind is regarded as the effect.

Representationalism is common in different ways to the continental rationalists, especially Descartes, and to the British empiricists, including Locke and Hume. Each of these authors argues for knowledge based on a cognitive inference from an idea in the mind to the mind-independent external world. Each further denies a direct grasp of the surrounding world in avoiding the difficulties of naïve realism in favor of representative realism.

Representationalism in all known versions exhibits a single fatal flaw: the manifest inability to demonstrate that the representation in fact represents. If the access to what is represented is only available through its representation, then there is in effect no way to determine the relation of the representation to what it represents. It follows that any known form of representationalism fails.

This paper has so far examined two views of the relation of art and truth. In both cases, cognition rests on an inference from the idea in the mind to the mind-independent external world. In different ways, intuitionism and representationalism both attempt to meet the criterion for knowledge proposed on speculative grounds by Parmenides at the dawn of the Western tradition. I use the term “speculative” since I believe Parmenides already advances a form of transcendental argument, or a supposed analysis of the conditions of possibility in suggesting possible conditions of knowledge, which, in his opinion, require a cognitive grasp of mind-independent reality. In Kantian terms, this would amount to knowledge of the thing in itself, or again knowledge of mind-independent reality.

I turn now to a third view, more precisely a non-Platonic alternative, which I will be calling cognitive constructivism. “Constructivism” is any form of the general claim that a minimal condition of knowledge is that the cognitive subject in some way “constructs” the cognitive object as a condition of knowing it. The result is a clear contrast between traditional approaches to knowledge based on finding, discovering or uncovering what is, on the one hand, and the very different, clearly incompatible view that the cognitive object is rather made, produced, or constructed.

This approach is already present in ancient mathematics, notably in Euclidean geometry. It comes into modern philosophy in Hobbes, Vico, and Kant.

In the critical philosophy, constructivism is a synonym for the often mentioned, but rarely analyzed and little understood Copernican revolution in philosophy. In the famous B preface of the first *Critique* Kant outlines a constructivist approach to mathematics, modern natural science and the future science of metaphysics. According to Kant, the cognitive success of modern natural science is based on the insight that the subject can only know what it constructs according to a plan of its

own. He explicitly recommends a similar experiment in metaphysics, Kant's term for cognition, or what is now more often called theory of knowledge.

This lengthy excursus in theory of knowledge is justified by the current focus on art and truth. Constructivism is key not only to modern theory of cognition but also to the relation of art and truth. In the modern tradition, Kant and Hegel are two of the most important thinkers as well as two of the most important theoreticians of aesthetics.

We can situate the differences in their respective conceptions of aesthetics, more precisely their conceptions of the relation of art and truth, with respect to a constructivist conception of cognition. Kant, who introduces constructivism into idealist epistemology, separates aesthetics from cognition. Since he disjoins art and truth, he remains a Platonist. Hegel, who is committed to a view of art as a source of truth, is both anti-Kantian as well as anti-Platonic. He formulates a constructivist approach to art, hence to the relation of art and truth, in developing the idea of the identity of identity and difference. This leads to a complex analysis of the constructivist point that we know ourselves in what we do. Since we construct the object or, by extension, the social world we can know it. A function of art is to tell us who we are. What we know is not a universal constant but a historical variable, which is embedded in the historical matrix, as witness the famous but little understood Hegelian dictum that art is dead.

This idea is often misunderstood. Hegel is not saying art is over. He is rather making the very different point that as society changes the social function of art and art objects also changes. For in a society in which as a result of increasing secularization the transcendent religious dimension has been steadily eclipsed, art can no longer function to reveal it.

I come now to my conclusion. I have suggested that Plato's rejection of the view that non-philosophical art is true gave rise to a debate later traversing the entire Western aesthetic tradition. I have further suggested that the post-Platonic Western aesthetic tradition can be reconstructed as an effort by many hands to come to grips with and if possible overturn the Platonic judgment. I have finally suggested that Hegel, in disagreeing with both Kant and Plato, presents an interesting anti-Platonic argument for re-forging as it were the ancient link between art and truth. For in the final analysis, art, or at least some kinds of art, is not only beautiful but also in a deep sense true.