

Remarks on Art and Truth

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ABSTRACT | The importance of Parmenides for the ensuing debate is often overlooked, in part no doubt because of the difficulty of formulating an acceptable interpretation, which overlooks the importance of his position. Joseph Margolis takes a starkly negative view. He suggests the meager outcome of the classical phase of Western philosophy lies in abandoning what he describes as Parmenides' constraint. A number of observers think the Eleatic is the father of Western philosophy. I have suggested, on the contrary, 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 useful 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.

KEYWORDS | Parmenides; Plato; Aesthetics; Parmenides's Constraint

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The importance of Parmenides for the ensuing debate is often overlooked, in part no doubt because of the difficulty of formulating an acceptable interpretation, which overlooks the importance of his position. Joseph Margolis takes a starkly negative view. He suggests the meager outcome of the classical phase of Western philosophy lies in abandoning what he describes as Parmenides' constraint.¹

A number of observers think the Eleatic is the father of Western philosophy. According to Parmenides, thought and being are the same. Directly or indirectly this claim influences a long list of thinkers up to the present, crucially including Plato, Kant and Hegel as well as many others. Plato thinks Parmenides is the father of philosophy, but the meaning of this claim is unclear.

In relying in his poem on Fragment 2, Parmenides has long been read in different but related ways. One is the view that, as he writes, thinking (or thought) and being, are the same. In that case what is (or ontology) and what we know (or epistemology) would coincide. Another is the view that we know what is, which is held by realists of all kinds. And, finally, there is the anti-realist skeptical view that we cannot and do not know what appears.

Plato, who long ago was influenced by Parmenides, is a post-Parmenidean. He suggests we know that know the mind-independent real in several places. In the *Meno*, Plato briefly sketches a simple but effective geometrical argument as follows. Socrates asks the slave if he knows what a square is (82b). He answers in defining a square as having four equal sides, each of which measures two feet (82e) and then examines that claim. Now twice 4 feet is 8 feet (83e). A line double that length is four times bigger (83e). And a line twice this length is four times as long (83c). Now putting together four four-foot squares yields 16 square feet. The slave goes on to agree with Socrates that the diagonal that bisects the 8 foot-line yields a square with an area of 8 square feet (85c).

In the *Meno*, Plato maintains a constructivist view. A similar view is formulated much later by Kant in the *Prolegomena*.² In the *Meno* he believes that we do not know what we do not make since we know only what we make. The mature Plato later seems to have second thoughts about endorsing any form of constructivism. In the *Republic*, when he has already worked out one and possibly more versions of the notorious theory of forms (or ideas), he understands it as any of a limitless number of types of imitation, more specifically a single form that applies to many things which have the same name. In the last book of the dialogue, Plato describes the relation between a single form which is not and cannot be made by a human

¹ See Joseph Margolis, *The Critical Margolis*, Edited and With a Preface by Russell Pryba, Albany, NY, pp. 263-255.

² See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Gary Hatfield, trans., New York: Cambridge University Press, para. 38, p. 68-72.

being and the many things that human beings can and do make. Socrates differentiates three kinds of cognitive object, including one that cannot be made by a human being but that is made by the gods, another that is made by a carpenter who imitates what he makes, and a final one made by a painter who imitates what the carpenter makes.

In the *Republic*, Plato maintains that the Parmenidean view, or the identity of thinking and being can be stated both positively and negatively, positively as the suggestion that we know what we make and negatively as the suggestion that we do not know what we do not make. Left unclear is the point Plato is trying to bring out. One possibility is the identity of thinking and being that goes back at least until Parmenides. If thinking and being are the same, then an individual, who knows only what he makes, cannot know what he did not make. For we can only know if we can grasp directly the mind-independent object made, for instance, by a god or nature. It follows that a carpenter cannot know a bed he makes nor a painter know the bed he paints. Knowledge is necessarily reserved for the god who, according to Plato, alone makes the world. It follows that for the mature Plato the view that we know only what we make that applies in the early Plato no longer applies in the later Plato. In that case, Plato, who is not a Parmenidean, is an anti-Parmenidean, committed to the view that we do not and cannot know the mind-independent real.

The difficulty which arises is that the identity of the original object and what appears in its instantiation can be asserted. But it cannot be demonstrated. According to Plato we can only know that the object resembles its instantiation, but not that it imitates correctly. In other words, Parmenides suggests that we do not and cannot know that an object made by a person correctly imitates the form or idea since, as Plato shows, we cannot know a mind-independent object but can only know a mind-dependent object. This leaves unresolved the problem of the identity between the imitation and what it imitates that much later becomes Kant's problem.

Remarks on Art, Truth and Culture

"Art" suggests a related problem. What "art" means is culture specific, hence not universal at all. In the West, until roughly the 17th 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 very 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 aesthetics in suggesting two points: as he understands them, art and art objects of the most varied kinds and truth 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 beginning in the Eleatic tradition. The Platonic view can be reconstructed 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 really is. Second, art is, hence, inextricably linked to cognition. It follows that 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, then 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 much later, say 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 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. The reflection theory of knowledge, which later became a staple of Marxism, was already anticipated in Plato's time by Socrates. In anticipating the later theory of reflection 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, 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 and others.

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, as well as 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 representation, in fact any representation, actually 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 represen-

tationalism 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 that at the dawn of the philosophical tradition 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, hence knowledge of reality.

I turn now to a third view, or 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. 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 as well as 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 modern 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. It follows that a function of art is to tell us who we are. What we know is not a universal constant but a historical variable, embedded in the historical matrix, as witness the famous 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 useful 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.

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