

## Preface

**A YOUNG FRIEND OF MINE** who lives and works in Madrid and who knows my published views very thoroughly recently sent me the draft of a longish paper of his in which, rather generously, he reviews some themes of mine, featuring in particular my having said that although *Homo sapiens* is a “natural-kind” kind, human beings—human selves—really have no nature, are no more than artifacts, histories, hybrids of biology and culture, the sites of certain transformed powers peculiar to human possibility. That single idea is as close to the pivot of my best intuition as anything I can think of. It was indeed the unmarked focus of a book my young friend had reviewed, as well as the somewhat more explicit but still decentered focus of the book before you now, a notion translated into the puzzles of the art world, very far removed in an academic sense—but not really—from the moral/political topics of the earlier book.

I can't say that I've chosen this conception of the self for my own; it's nearer the truth to confess that it's captured me, as I imagine will be clear enough when you read on. It's been shaping my thought over the span of an entire career, deployed I realize in every philosophical niche that has caught my interest. So that now it's a broadly unified conception, still somewhat elusive, which, though hardly orthodox, I've tried to demonstrate is a most resourceful replacement for many a canonical philosophy able to command a sizable fiefdom.

I've been at these inquiries too long to be unaware of my direction. I've been retracing my steps back from the distinctive compartmentalizations of philosophical topics that hold sway in our time and that have put

too much of twentieth-century philosophy in danger of irrelevance and thankless inflexibility. I cannot see how, for instance, the conceptual questions of moral and political life can be separated from the questions posed by the fine arts, or for that matter, how the work of the philosophy of science can rightly be very far removed from the discoveries of the philosophy of art (and vice versa). Each of these inquiries reflects our limited understanding of a limited sector of the world reviewed without any reliable sense of where the true beginnings of such an understanding lie: they are inseparably embedded in the passing uncertainties of historical life itself. I rely on the recuperative idea of the “human” to provide a holist bond for all our inquiries, otherwise unable to collect the world as legibly one. We don’t know—we have never known—what “all our inquiries” includes, beyond the obvious scatter of “all.”

Hegel, whom I very much admire, realized very early on that in his own age he could hold the entire world together as an intelligible unity, if he viewed it (against Kant) as the self-transforming structure of an all-encompassing “mind” or *Geist* absorbed in its own evolving understanding of “itself”—incomplete in all its reflections but manifested *in us*. So he treats *Geist* as if it were present everywhere—and yet indissolubly one. I regard this as a daring metaphor for the matched intelligibility of the world and the informing power of encultured human inquiry that, thus deployed, continues at the same time it replaces something akin to Kant’s transcendental constructivism. Hegel offers instead a historicized alternative that avoids the extremes of Kant’s realist conception of a closed system. Here, we are caught in Hegel’s extravagant metaphor of Absolute *Geist*: a power implicit in our finite and historicized cognitive competence capable of grasping the infinite fulfillment of our finite powers—rightly read, however, as the invention of the latter (*Encyclopedia Logic*, §§49–50, 95).

If this is a fair reading, then I admit to having taken Hegelian instruction. But I don’t believe we need any literal *Geist*, and I don’t believe we can afford any such an extravagance now, at least beyond the scruple that admits that our competing conceptual pictures of the world are no more than salient fragments that collect under the canopy of encultured thought, by which we understand the world inseparably from understanding ourselves and understand our understanding ourselves inseparably from understanding the world. That, a sort of demythologized *Geist*, is what I mean to signal in the most oblique of ways. The theory of the arts, like the theory of the sciences, is and cannot help being opportunistic in this regard.

I am more impressed with the narrative discontinuities and discontinuous diversities of *geistlich* unity than Hegel seems to have been. Human agents, I would say, require a functional unity for their individual careers, though, even there, the regulative and seeming constitutive requirements of personal unity tend to outstrip the experienced discrepancies of actual agency and memory. In any event, whatever is required here hardly seems to oblige us to read the unrolling of collective cultural life or history as completely coherent or as narratively one. The matter was profoundly disputed between Sartre and Foucault, for instance, under Hegel's shadow: if we yield here, as it seems we must, then surely our retrospective accounts of the unity of individual agents will be subject to the vagaries of the reflexive interpretation and reinterpretation of encultured life itself.

In that sense, Hegel's conception of dialectical logic must win out over whatever longings he may have had that matched the ambitious closure Kant claimed to find in the body of scientific knowledge—the prize of Kant's transcendentalism. History confirms that history is itself perspectival, remembered in small bursts compatible with sleep and uncertain memory and the overlay of new experience and changes in our habits of understanding. It's in this sense that the cultural world is determinable but not determinate, plural and diverse, never completely coherent or closed, hospitable to conflicting ways of understanding what we acknowledge to be the same events and artifacts of a shared world.

The theory of the fine arts defines the most convincing space in which the implications of this strange sort of tolerance—so alien to the theory of physical nature—take center stage. Yet if we follow the implicated argument, the supposed unity of the natural sciences is at risk as well, always the belated construction of the same encultured world in which the discrepancies just admitted hold sway. I should like to think that that is what Hegel intended to make clear: that is, in accord with whatever is required for the intelligibility of our lives, how we spontaneously impose a narratized meaning on our running experience of the evolving world. We cannot reach closure in finite time, and we cannot expect that whatever telic convergence we find at any time will hold fast as history itself unfolds. That seems to be the natural import of what Hegel's theory requires. But if it is not, then I dare say my reading of Hegel is better than what Hegel himself intends—or what a large part of the academy claims to find in Hegel. In that case, I declare that the contrary is preposterous! I understand, of course, that admitting this much places me under a serious debt.

Somewhere, I shall have to try to explain the unity and difference between the natural and the human sciences—but not now.

What follows, then, is an exercise in what may be called *philosophical anthropology*: the effort to hold on to a sense of *geistlich* unity in what otherwise risks the unacceptable scatter of an autonomous “philosophy of art” or “aesthetics,” or a “philosophy of mind” or a “philosophy of science,” as these disciplines are now construed. I invoke the advantage of a holist stance without actually providing a full philosophical defense or a complete articulation of the corrective discipline I have in mind. You will be the judge of its incipient virtue.

These are telltale admissions, I don’t deny. But they are freely acknowledged, and in any case, they are perfectly obvious. I’ve been searching for a way to restore, within the terms of English-language and Eurocentric practice, the natural unity of philosophy and its characteristic disciplines, which until recent times always qualified the best philosophical work, regardless of doctrinal persuasion. I’ve recovered the obvious, I suppose: the need for a fresh analysis of the human condition, which, as I see matters, affords a sense of the common conceptual space of every inquiry and commitment.

I begin eccentrically then with a reinterpretation of the Socratic elenchus for our time, the start of an attempt to bring our modern sense of the historicity of the human to bear on our continual rereading of the ancient philosophical tradition that lacked a sustained notion of what strikes us now (quite literally) as our encultured “second nature.” We cannot recover the holism needed unless and until we resolve the conceptual strain between the appeal of the idea of historical existence and the ancient grip of what is said to be changelessly real. (That, as I see matters, *is* the true point of a modern reading of the Socratic elenchus.) Still, beginning there, I have in mind defining the whole of the cultural world (if possible) and, within it, the strategic puzzles literature, painting, and music pose regarding our nature and identity—ourselves, as the acknowledged creators and principal creatures (or creations) of our artifactual and hybrid world.

You may say that the argument that follows is a piece of metaphysics—a piece of the metaphysics of art if you please—cast in the Hegelian spirit. But the term “metaphysics” has been diminished, in America and Europe, so that it is often read as flagging presumptions of a privileged knowledge—which is to say, made indefensible. Metaphysics is neither privilege nor nonsense nor the dismissal of privilege or nonsense, but I’m

prepared to run with the current fashion, if fashion is not allowed to judge its own credentials for the rest of us. I therefore coopt, in choosing my subtitle, the fashion of an earlier age—which comes to the same thing as “metaphysics” but is less quarrelsome for the moment—the designation “philosophical anthropology,” by which I mean quite literally a theory of *human being* drawn from the “hybrid” sources of biology and historical culture, *not* the reduction of philosophy to anthropology.

Here I mean to draw out, by close attention to certain central problems in the philosophy of art—notably, puzzles bearing on the complexities of perceiving artworks—the need to admit certain strategically placed features of human being that are normally ignored: for instance, why the analysis of physical nature cannot be expected to admit (from its usual vantage) what it nevertheless must finally admit. If my holist intuitions are correct, then the fact that every science is a human science, that the powers of human inquiry are artifacts of cultural life, itself shows the way to a recovery of the unity of the sciences within the novel (the generally neglected) terms of cultural life. By such a discovery, the philosophy of art becomes the natural ally of, and even something of a mentor for, the theory of science and mind and similar disciplines. I see the effort as a preparatory labor for a novel theory of the unity of the sciences; but I have no wish to make this the principal issue of my philosophical anthropology. I see it gathering strength by indirection, and I count on another occasion to bring it into full view. So it is enough to say that ever since Hegel’s critique of Kant, the principal conceptual puzzle of the modern world that we identify as metaphysics and philosophical anthropology concerns the unity of physical nature and human culture, or the unity of the search for universality and the admitted discontinuities of contingent historicity. But Hegel already perceived that, too.

This helps to explain why, in exploring the salient questions of the philosophy of art, I find myself obliged at every turn to take account of the holist corrections that now seem seriously, even dangerously, neglected. Proceeding this way, I admit I’ve produced a heterodox sort of recovery: that is, by construing artworks as a diverse kind of human “utterance.” Nevertheless, the conceptual space occupied by the philosophy of art is hardly more than a small neighborhood within the continent of human culture: it cannot be analyzed separately from the rest of that huge world, although you will look in vain—well, almost in vain—for an account of what it is to be a human person, or self, in any recent standard

English-language philosophy of art or philosophy of mind, or philosophy of science for that matter. If you concede the point, you will already have caught my purpose in speaking of “philosophical anthropology” or, alternatively, of the “metaphysics of culture.”

If you concede the point, then consider the present effort an attempt to sketch how things appear in one strategically placed philosophical specialty—a schema ready, should it prove promising, to be applied as well in other subdisciplines. It means to exhibit the analytic power and advantage of invoking a *geistlich* unity in answering selected questions in the philosophy of art without yielding to the fatal extravagances of any literal reading of the merely heuristic notion of an encompassing *Geist*.

Put more slimly, I try to show how essential it is to the theory of art to fashion a conception of reality that indissolubly unites the analysis of physical nature and the analysis of human culture. The idea is ignored in recent Anglo-American philosophies of art: it is its recovery that I take to be the principal theme of “philosophical anthropology.” It’s the recovery of a salient “interest,” as the postmodernists say, but it’s a recovery justified by its demonstrable advantage—which is what metaphysics and philosophical anthropology come to. It’s more a matter of restoration than of revolution, though, in our extremity, it’s hard to tell the difference. For my own part, it defines the best conceptual space in which the radical constructivism linking the subjective and objective aspects of cognition and intelligence that Kant and Hegel bequeath our modern age stands any chance of reintegrating the disparate parts of the Eurocentric world.

J. M.

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