

The War Over Truth

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The history of the relationship between art and science can be presented as one of a conflict, or even a war where the most important thing at stake is the knowledge of the truth. On the one hand, we have science with its methodology and the tedious work of gathering evidence, the constant verifying and challenging of scientific achievements. On the other one, there is art, which leads us to direct contact with the most important thing, thus causing us to face the unmasked truth. Although rationality and illumination appear to be radically different, they do intersect at some point, best expressed in Archimedes' famous exclamation: "Eureka!" It serves to show that the ways in which art and science work may be diametrically different, but they do appear to be working towards a common goal.

A common goal?

I used the word "appear" because from the outset epistemology has encountered a fundamental difficulty posed by the question of whether science and art do actually strive to uncover the same truth. Do they indeed share a common goal? After all, science has the task of discovering the laws that govern the world, while the purpose of art is purely esthetic. Do the dynamics of revelation, ecstasy, epiphany, and sudden illumination fit within scientific goals? Is there room in art for trial and error, for successes and failures, for blind alleys and unexpected discoveries that lead to unraveling the order governing the world? Or maybe art is nothing short of chaos, and thus produces only a more or less naïve pretense of order, one that can briefly obscure the real complexity of the universe by replacing it with a simplified mimetic model that we happily accept because it allows us a moment of relief? Or maybe the opposite is true, and it is art that allows us to go beyond the limitations of the mind, and science that is helpless because it can only create a conceptual network that fits human perception and impose it upon reality, deceiving us into thinking that it is a lot simpler and more structured than it actually is? Everything depends on how we define the truth. Does it involve correspondence between our statements and the facts, or do we treat it as a transcendent category? If we make the truth contingent on its verifiability (or

falsifiability), we remain in the realm of science. But if we recognize that truth as such exists objectively and independently, we can move towards the possibility of experiencing it directly, thus entering the domain of esthetic or mystical experiences.

The flip side of the question of truth is the question of deceit. Which deceives us more, art or science? In the case of the former, this indictment is a lot better documented. Since ancient times, art has been known to produce illusion (*apate*). Even if artists attempt to copy reality, they do so in a particular way, namely by using the method applied in the 5th century BC by the painter Zeuxis. In order to paint a portrait of Helen of Troy, he compiled the finest features of five models, winners of a contest held in the city of Croton. By so doing he achieved an image that was perfect yet had no referent in reality, which rendered it fundamentally untrue. By deceiving viewers, however, he enabled them to experience beauty that went beyond their everyday experiences, thus bringing them closer to knowledge of the utmost beauty. Does this mean that illusion is identical with deceit? Maybe it paradoxically brings us closer to the truth, which remains hidden in everyday life?

In this context, science, which is based on the principle of objectivity, should not deceive us. After all, it does not allow itself, at least not in theory, to go beyond the solid facts upon which it is founded. The fundamental question, however, pertains to the facts themselves. How do we arrive at facts and what principles do we use when we make assumptions? The complexity of the reality that surrounds us has proved on multiple occasion to extend beyond the existing framework of science, overturning unquestionable concepts and forcing scholars to re-start their painstaking quests. I would hazard the working hypothesis that art creates pretense consciously, leaving the door open to multidirectional interpretations, whereas scientific illusion is based on the assumption of objectivity and unambiguity, which is a lot more difficult to go beyond.

If we stick to ancient examples, we can observe, on the one hand, the transparency of the method applied by Zeuxis, who did not attempt to convince anyone that Helen as the most beautiful woman existed outside his painting, and numerous mistakes made by



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Aristotle, who invoked scientific certainty and led mankind astray for many centuries (for example, in his studies on the mechanisms of human reproduction). The essential difference lies in the fact that art has never aspired to wield authority to the same extent as science, because it left a wide margin for itself resulting from the intrinsic consent to the subjectivity of both the creator and the audience.

Shared limitations

Although the strategies of social influence in science and in art were, and still are, completely different, we should look at the limitations imposed on them to see certain important common points. Through their actions, both scientists and artists enter the realm of exploration, which can change the framework of the existing order of understanding the world and the ways in which humans function in this world. In other words, this is the realm of innovation and inventiveness.

But therein lies a certain danger because in Christianity this field of creativity is reserved exclusively for God. The consequences of violating this boundary have sometimes been dramatic. In the order imposed by the Church, both science and art were denied the right to mount any revolution. In my opinion, this confrontation of scientific and artistic exploration was

most clearly visible in the Renaissance. Nicholas of Cusa wrote: “there is not to be believed to be positable anything that is only nature or only art; for everything, in its own way, partakes of them both.”¹ This thesis draws together both domains and may serve as a starting point for understanding the strategies of artists and scholars – as, importantly, they have often combined these two fields in their activities. For Nicholas of Cusa, the most important value was invention, human ingenuity, which made functioning in the world easier. The problem lay in the question of whether acting on one’s own was not tantamount to violating the order established by God.

This argument, especially in relation to science, continues to be raised until the present day in discussions between proponents and opponents of progress. The assumption that humans can freely invent solutions carries numerous dangers. In art, this assumption translates into the ability to go beyond the mimetic paradigm. In science, it impacts on the ability to make free explorations that allow us to redefine the way in which we think about the world around us. There is no doubt that an unfettered searching for new paths is the most important common sin shared by science and art.

¹ trans. J. Hopkins

Leonardo da Vinci believed that art, as “the grandchild of nature and related to God,”² in fact simply meant science. In his *Treatise on Painting*, he pointed out that painting (which for him ranked at the very top of the arts) had cognitive aspirations because it took advantage of scientific achievements, namely perspective and *chiaroscuro* modeling. As such, painting can achieve a lot more than any other type of cognition, because it has tools for capturing not only quantitative, but also qualitative relations between things. Therefore, painting can grasp what eludes words, thus directly finding its way into the minds of the viewers. For this reason, artists are in fact scientists, and the strategies of science and art are complementary. It could be said that an artist can not only use the achievements of science (optics in the case of painting) but also go one step further by presenting them in a visible and therefore generally accessible form. Art is the most perfect form of cognition.

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One person who disagreed with da Vinci (albeit only seemingly) was one of his great contemporaries, Michelangelo Buonarroti, who saw beauty as remaining within the domain of art. However, he was guided primarily by reason, which is the basic tool for artists, who arrive at decisions based not on emotions, but on rationality, and therefore make the right choices. In Michelangelo’s view, art obviously produced deceit, but it was a very special type of deceit, one that was in fact the most profound truth.

The winner

Could we say, then, that it is art that wins out in the war over the truth? Needless to say, the matter is a lot more complicated. After all, it is science we owe for orderly proof and reliable exploration of the world around us. Artists did not invent vaccines and space rockets; nor did they discover the periodic table of chemical elements or create the Internet. Behind this discussion, however, there lies a certain uncertainty about the category of the truth itself. If we assume that

it has a metaphysical element in it and can fall upon us like a sudden revelation, we then become tempted by the idea that it may reveal itself in a sudden glimpse of illumination. Perhaps this revelation is the condition that enables something radically new to take shape? Maybe the order of discovery eludes rationality, which uses it to build its systematic approaches? In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger observes that science “science is no original happening of truth, but rather in every case the cultivation of an already open domain of truth.”³ The most important representatives of philosophical hermeneutics agree with this thesis. Truth understood in this way is an event – an opening or a crack through which the possibility of verification can be seen for a brief moment. Metaphorically speaking, it is like a beam of light that briefly illuminates semi-darkness. In this understanding, the task of science would be to interpret, to collect more facts, to seek justifications, to find connections that were visible for a moment in a glimpse of illumination that made it possible to go beyond the existing paradigm and create a new one. After all, both science and art are based on experience. This calls into question Kant’s assumption that the nature of art is “purely esthetic.”

In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote that “the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind, certainly different from that sensory knowledge which provides science with the ultimate data from which it constructs the knowledge of nature, and certainly different from all moral rational knowledge, and indeed from all conceptual knowledge – but still knowledge, i.e., conveying truth.”⁴ For this reason, we can hazard the hypothesis that the two fields being discussed here are complementary, although it is certain that their tools and goals will be radically different. Complementarity, however, does not in any way mean hierarchy; nor does it suggest that they occupy the same space or perform the same function.

I am not certain I have managed to provide a sufficient summary of this topic in this short essay. That said, I am certain that I have not created a work in which truth might reveal itself with full reality. Science, though it often builds its power upon authorities, is largely about hesitation, as Thomas Kuhn argued. Art, even during the work of questioning, remains incomparably more resolute. In addition, the whole situation is made more complicated by the fact that the classical triad includes not only beauty and truth, but also goodness – and some people claim that morality, which is an art, should be a proper object of science. ■

² *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* ed. Jean Paul Richter.

³ trans. Roger Berkowitz and Philippe Nonet

⁴ 2nd revised edition, trans. Weinsheimer and Marshall