

Philosophy and the Arts

Remarks made at the Yale Graduate School Alumni Association symposium *Philosophy: Past, Present and Future*, April 25 - 27, 2008

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The title of this session is *Philosophy and the Arts*. We have been asked to speak for “only about ten minutes or so, drawing on our experience at Yale and the ways in which that experience shaped our philosophical thought.” I find it somewhat difficult to do so. To be sure, my experience at Yale, especially the mentorship I received from George Schrader, helped shape my own philosophical position, which is located somewhere in the vicinity of Heidegger and Kant, but closer to Kant. That I turned to Heidegger was due in good part to the fact that very little by him had been translated in 1958, and in a number of courses I was asked to report on not yet translated works. But my interest in the arts was deeper and antedates my Yale experience and in hindsight makes it seem almost inevitable that my philosophical thinking should have been shaped also by art, and in recent years especially by architecture. This has made me very much a boundary crosser.

When I studied at Yale aesthetics was given no very significant place in the philosophy curriculum, although towards the end of his Yale career Paul Weiss did turn to art with extraordinary enthusiasm, beginning even to paint. But neither his art nor his philosophy of art, based on his metaphysics, could then excite me. I learned more from Louis Mackey who, however, like so many promising junior faculty members, soon was to leave Yale. Aesthetics had no very significant place in the department’s understanding of its mission. In this respect things have hardly improved, a state of affairs hardly unique to Yale. And what need does a philosophy department have for the philosophy of art? Is it more than an ornament that may be nice to have, but is hardly essential in the way supposed core disciplines such as epistemology and metaphysics are today taken to be? Indeed, what does the philosophy of art matter — to philosophy, to art, to society?

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Let me approach this question in quite personal terms:

How has my interest in art and especially architecture been important to my work in philosophy?

More important to me is a second question:

What do art and architecture have to contribute to philosophy?

At first blush the answer to the latter question would seem to have to be: very little, at least given common ideas of what philosophy is. To be sure, philosophers have liked to invoke architectural metaphors, have liked to speak of laying foundations, of raising conceptual edifices, of the architectonics of some philosophical system. But how much work do such metaphors really do? It would seem that someone who insists on an intimate relationship between philosophy and architecture or art would have to have a rather strange understanding of the task of philosophy, strange in the way in which Heidegger's thinking renders itself strange when he places it in an essential relationship to the poetry of Hölderlin. Can a philosopher claim this and remain a philosopher?

But to give even a sketchy answer to my second question I shall have to say something about how I understand the task of philosophy. Before returning to this question, let me, however, first say a few words in answer to the first.

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How has my interest in art and architecture been important to my work in philosophy? I should begin by reiterating that my love of art and architecture is much older than my interest in philosophy and goes back to my childhood. My book *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*, which appeared in 1983 and is now to appear in a German edition was born of that love.

The very fact that I wrote such a book suggests a certain impatience with academic philosophy, although I personally do not see a profound break between this book and my more obviously philosophical work. That book touches on many, perhaps all the themes that matter to me as a philosopher and to which I first gave expression in my dissertation, which was on nihilism. Schrader was my adviser.

Let me mention here just a few of these themes:

1. That book is part of an extended reflection on the historical threshold that separates Baroque and Rococo from the Enlightenment. But that threshold also is the threshold of our modern world. There is a sense in which this book is thus also a reflection on our own spiritual culture, on both its legitimacy and on its limits. Kant, and especially his *Critique of Judgment*, remains important to me because he occupies that same threshold and offers us a key to understanding both.

2. A reviewer called this book a preamble after the fact of my first book, *The Meaning of Modern Art* of 1968, which was a greatly expanded version of just one brief chapter in my dissertation. In a sense he was right. That earlier book called for a step beyond modern art, and not just modern art, but beyond the nihilistic understanding of reality that this art presupposed. Since writing that book I have come to see much more clearly what such a step presupposes: an overcoming of what Nietzsche calls "the spirit of revenge," of that "ill will against time and its 'it was'" that has supported metaphysics ever since Plato and at the same time prevents us from fully affirming all that binds us to time, prevents us from affirming ourselves as the mortals we are: finite and embodied. Much of my philosophical work has continued to circle around the possibility of such an overcoming, as it did already in my dissertation.

3. Closely linked is the need to challenge that aesthetic approach to art and architecture, which, ever since Baumgarten's establishment of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in the orbit of Cartesian rationalism, has presided both over the production and the theory of art. That approach leads with some necessity to an understanding of works of architecture as decorated sheds, as functional buildings to which an aesthetic component has been added. And similarly it leads to an understanding of art as an aesthetic addendum to an often all too prosaic life. As its title suggests, in *The Ethical Function of Architecture* I argued that whatever distinguishes architecture from mere building needs to be understood differently. That the book spoke to issues that mattered to architects is shown not only by the fact that it was honored by the American Institute of Architects, but also by my being asked to write the lead essay for a large volume celebrating the AIA's 150th anniversary that was celebrated this month.

Of central importance in *The Ethical Function of Architecture* is the concept of re-presentation. I would like to distinguish, somewhat artificially I admit, ornament from

mere decoration as follows: ornament is decoration that has a re-presentational function. Or decoration is ornament that has shed its re-presentational function. And what is here said of decoration can be said also of beauty as understood by the aesthetic approach. From a self-sufficient formal beauty we have to distinguish a beauty that has a re-presentational function.

As this critique of what I have called the aesthetic approach suggests, I am impatient with all philosophy that remains content to address problems posed by previous philosophizing without questioning the presupposed frameworks and maps. Works of art and architecture especially invite such questioning.

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Let me turn then to my second and more important question: what do art and architecture have to contribute to philosophy? I suggested already that an answer to this question forces us to ask: what is philosophy? And the fact that so many philosophers continue to struggle with just this question suggest that there is no simple answer.

But let me at least approach this question with a quote from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein claims there that philosophical problems have the form, "I do not know my way about," a quote that recalls Aristotle who would have philosophy begin in wonder. Of course, not all problems having this form are therefore already philosophical. To lose one's way in a strange city is not sufficient to make one a philosopher. Nor is failure to understand a new piece of equipment. Say my computer misbehaves and I don't know what to do; I don't know my way about. But why does such loss of way not present us with a philosophical problem? I would suggest that it fails to do so because in such cases our disorientation is only superficial. Thus in the first case I might study a map; in the second I might ask an expert for help. The problem poses itself against a background of established and accepted ways of doing things to which we can turn to help us decide what is to be done. Genuinely philosophical problems, I would like to suggest, have no such background. They emerge wherever human beings have begun to question the place assigned them by nature, society, and history, and searching for firmer ground demand that this place be more securely established. Again and again works of art have occasioned such questioning.

So understood philosophy comes to an end, either when it despairs of responsibly addressing the questions that haunt it, or when it steps on what it takes to be firm ground and establishes what is now accepted as a secure foundation. When the latter happens philosophy gives birth to a science. There is thus a sense in which science and skepticism may be said to bound philosophy. Science may be said to have presented philosophy with a challenge resembling that which photography presented to representational painting.

But science itself presents itself today to us as anything but unquestionable. There is a sense in which everyone of us, I suspect, stands in an ambiguous relationship to science and its offspring, technology. On one hand we have to affirm science. Given many problems we face, it would be irresponsible not to do so. On the other hand science cannot know anything of persons as persons. Nor can it know anything of values. To give an account of both the legitimacy and limits of scientific understanding and that means also of technological thinking seems to me one of the main tasks facing philosophy today.

But such an account must be guided by some understanding of where we should be going. The fundamental question of philosophy so understood is always: where should I be going? In this broad sense all philosophy is at bottom "ethical reflection," reflection concerning the ethos, our proper place.

But is philosophy able to determine our proper place? Traditionally such determinations were given not by philosophers, but by prophets and poets, and statesmen. Plato's *Republic* gives expression to the claim that the philosopher should take over from the poet the task of telling the Greeks what their place should be. The ethical function that religion, art, and politics once had now comes to be claimed by reason.

Unfortunately, reason has proved unequal to the assumed task. As Nietzsche saw, we live today in the ruins of the inherited value system. To support this claim I would have to show that, notwithstanding the efforts of philosophers from Plato to Kant and indeed right down to the present, reason alone is unable to discover the ends of human actions. Such ends are established differently. The mythopoeic function of art remains indispensable even if it is hard to separate the mythmaker from the fool.

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What then becomes of the philosopher who continues to wrestle with what I just called the fundamental question of philosophy? He will wrestle inevitably also with what I have called the mythopoeic function. Such wrestling may well make the philosopher look foolish, since it requires a willingness to distance oneself from what has come to be accepted as common sense. I think the philosophers the age most profoundly needs should be somewhat like the fools or jesters of long ago. A healthy society needs places where it tests its boundaries and explores radically new possibilities. There has to be an openness to the future. Art can be such a place. So can philosophy. I recognize the danger of such testing and experimentation. I thus also have a contrary sympathy: I think those who insist on the preservation of the inherited are also needed in a healthy society. There is inevitable tension between voices pointing in different directions, one forward — testing, experimenting, the other backward — wanting to preserve. I would want neither voice to be so immediately associated with power that it can translate its views into political reality. But both voices should be granted a bit of the fool's freedom. The fool at court said things that perhaps needed saying, but which also were easily dismissed and needed to be appropriated by others to become effective. I'm not at all denigrating this fool's freedom. And I'm not meaning to denigrate philosophers, when I say that they, too, should be a bit like the fool, the jester — Leszek Kolakowski, who joined this department for an all too brief time when I was chairman, called himself that and I admired him for it. Well aware of the need for both art and philosophy, also of the need to preserve their freedom, he provides an example that continues to challenge us.

Karsten Harries
Yale University

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