

Art and Knowledge-Capek's 'The Poet' as a Case Study

Lorand R*

University of Haifa, Israel

***Corresponding author:** Prof. Ruth Lorand, Department of Philosophy, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel 3498838, Tel: +972584848233; Email: lorand@research.haifa.ac.il

Conceptual Paper

Volume 2 Special Issue 1

Received Date: November 25, 2019

Published Date: December 09, 2019

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000S1-003

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence'

Abstract

In this paper I offer a reflective reading of a story by Karel Čapek, 'The Poet.' The story exhibits a variety of perspectives on the issue of art and knowledge. I take this variety as indicative of the nature of art appreciation. I argue that both aesthetic cognitivism and non-cognitivism in art are normative and overlook the variety of actual experiences of art. I advocate a descriptive approach that considers knowledge of different kinds to be influential in appreciating art. However, I am critical of the idea that knowledge has the power to determine artistic value.

Keywords: Aesthetic Cognitivism; Non-Cognitivism in Art; Artistic Value

Art is known for its fictionality. Although its material is taken from experience of various kinds, and although some works resemble or are closely related to actual objects or events, art is not expected to be faithful to them the way we expect history books, newspapers and scientific studies to be. We learn from history books about past events and from newspapers about current events; we expect scientific researches to provide knowledge that is effective beyond spatio-temporal factors. What kind of knowledge can we expect from art? On the one hand, being fictional, art is free to play with its material components and create new combinations regardless of their original form; on the other hand, we intuitively understand that art can reveal, directly or indirectly, significant knowledge of the world we live in.

Plato famously denied the cognitive value of art. According to Plato, art attempts to provide knowledge of details of passing events, seeking to capture the reality of the actual world, or create an illusion of it. This kind of

knowledge is trivial and insignificant, and perhaps should not be considered knowledge at all. But Plato similarly held that history or physics do not provide valuable knowledge, because the concept of knowledge he had in mind is that of eternal truth. Yet he often quoted Homer's poetry in order to support and demonstrate his own arguments and observations. Did he believe in the power of poetry to provide or pave the road to knowledge?

Aristotle held that art is marked by its cognitive value, though not in a conventional sense. Art does not necessarily offer true statements about the details of the actual world or a faithful depiction of it, and it certainly does not present well-argued theories. Art, according to Aristotle, teaches us about possibilities of essential human situations. This kind of knowledge is more significant and profound than factual knowledge since it concerns essential life situations and our nature as human beings. Well-presented possibilities convey general truth regardless of the accuracy of factual details. However,

since by definition possibilities cannot be proven right or wrong and, moreover, they maintain their status irrespective of their realization in the actual world, the nature of the knowledge they provide is not entirely clear¹.

Plato gave rise to the issue of fiction versus truth while Aristotle highlighted the tension between possibilities and actual facts. The debate over the cognitive value of art and its relevance to artistic value has a long history. The contemporary debate is known as the debate between aesthetic cognitivists and non-cognitivists². Aesthetic cognitivism holds that cognitive values determine, partly or fully, artistic values; the non-cognitivists argue that the artistic and the cognitive are separate, independent categories, and that the knowledge that a work of art may provide does not determine its worth as art. None of the parties denies that art, any work of art, may function as a source of knowledge of some sort or create some kind of knowledge. Rather, the focus of the debate is on the contribution of knowledge to artistic value and, more specifically, on the question whether or not art offers its own unique kind of knowledge, a kind that is essential to artistic value.

The basic concepts involved in the debate are far from being obvious or commonly agreed upon, therefore the argumentation for and against both sides is somewhat blurred. For instance, Lamarque, who may be considered a representative of the non-cognitive party, distinguishes between artistic and aesthetic values as two independent categories³. Gaut, a declared aesthetic cognitivist, holds that artistic value and aesthetic value are one and the same⁴. Is it just a difference in terminology or does it indicate a wide disagreement about the nature of art and fictionality? Is it possible to consider arguments put forward by both sides without clarifying their basic differences that go far beyond this specific issue? And if my own view of art differs from both⁵, can I join the

debate? Like with most, if not all, philosophical discussions, we are bound to move in circles delineated by our presuppositions, definitions, intuitions and partial knowledge without arriving at decisive and satisfactory answers.

To add to its complexity, the debate is essentially normative and not descriptive. It is concerned with the question, what *ought* to determine artistic value? and not with the question, how *is* artistic value actually determined? The former suggests that there is one proper way to approach art, learn from it and evaluate it as such. The latter suggests that different people hold different norms and, as a result, notice and learn different things and appreciate different aspects of art. Normative issues are not decided on the basis of evidence and argumentation; they are ideologically based, expressing wide worldviews and depending on perspective, interests and beliefs. This lies at the core of the dispute between Plato and Aristotle. Their basic ground and beliefs are different and so are their understanding of art, its function and its significance.

As any other object of human experience, art can be approached from different perspectives so that the question concerning the correct or justified approach, and the kind of knowledge that is relevant to artistic evaluation depend on differences in perspectives.

In what follows, I will illustrate this claim with a reflective reading of a story by Karel Čapek.

In a story entitled, 'The Poet'⁶, the Czech author provides a complex and ironical view on the relation between knowledge and poetry. The story is about a hit and run accident, a police investigator, and a poet who witnessed the accident. The investigator seeks useful information from people who saw the car hitting a drunken beggarwoman, but none of the witnesses is able to provide the crucial details: the type and color of the car and its license number. One of the witnesses mentions his friend, a poet, who was present at scene of the accident and ran home immediately after it had happened. The investigator invites the poet to the police station and asks him about the car details. "I didn't notice," says the poet and explains, "I never pay attention to details, you see." The desperate investigator asks: "just what, if I may ask, were you paying attention to?" "The total mood," replies the poet when suddenly he remembers that he jotted down something immediately after the accident. The

¹ On this see, for instance, Berys Gaut, "Art and Cognition." In Matthew Kieran (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006, 115–126.

² Peter Lamarque, "Cognitive Values in the Arts: Marking the Boundaries." In *idem.*, 127–142. Eileen John, "Art and Knowledge." In Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. 2d ed. London: Routledge, 2005, 417–429. John Gibson, "Cognitivism and the Arts." *Philosophy Compass* 3.4 (2008): 573–589.

³ Lamarque, *ibid.*, 127.

⁴ Gaut, *op cit.*, 115.

⁵ For a detailed presentation of my view, see Ruth Lorand, *Aesthetic Order—A Philosophy of Order, Beauty and Art*. London: Routledge, 2000.

⁶ Karel Čapek, *Tales from Two Pockets*, trans. Norma Comrada. North Haven CT: Catbird Press, 1994, 85–91.

investigator is intrigued and wants to see what the poet wrote. "It's nothing," replies the poet but agrees to recite it. He reads the poem melodiously, stretching the syllables:

march of dark houses once twice to stop to stand
 aurora plays upon a mandolin
 why girl do you blush
 with con coming car 120 HP to the end of earth or to
 Singapore
 stop stop the car flies on
 our great love sprawls in dust
 a girl a broken blossom
 swan's neck bosom drum and cymbal
 why do I weep so much⁷

"But what does it mean?" asks the investigator. "It's the automobile accident, of course," replies the poet and adds, "you mean you don't understand it?" The investigator claims that the poem does not convey any of the crucial details: time, place, car details, victim, and so on; it is, therefore, irrelevant to the case.

The poet, although attesting that he did not pay attention to details, insists that the requested details must have been somehow embedded in the poem, because of the nature of poetry in general:

[It] is only raw, surface reality. A poem is inner reality. Poems are unfettered, surreal images which reality evokes in the subconscious of the poet, you see? Visual and aural associations, you might say. And the reader must yield himself to them.

Since the investigator is eager to follow any hint in order to solve the case, he carefully attends to the poem with the assistance of the poet. Together they try to decipher the poem, word by word, line by line, with the goal of finding out the brute facts of the accident. Finally, after a close reading, they arrive at the conclusion that the car involved in the accident must be brown and its license number is 235. "Are you certain that the car had the license number 235?" asks the investigator. "I paid no attention whatsoever to any numbers," answers the poet, "But something like that must have been there — Or why else would it be here?" By "it" he refers to the images "swan's neck bosom drum and cymbal." "Swan's neck" suggests the typography of the number 2; "bosom" suggests 3 and "drum and cymbal" is the visual image of 5. Two days later, the investigator calls on the poet and tells him that the car was found and it really was brown

⁷ The poem is transcribed here in the exact way it appears in the story, without upper cases and punctuation marks.

with license number 235. The poet asks, "what car?" and the investigator replies by citing the relevant lines from the poem: "swan's neck bosom drum and cymbal."

What can we learn from this story? Čapek is known for his humor and irony and we may safely assume that he did not want the reader to simply believe that poems are merely coded texts, and that the differences between the information conveyed by, say, a newspaper item, a police report, and a poem rest only on their method, style or code. What is evident in the story is the presentation of multiple perspectives.

There are at least four different perspectives:

1. The investigator's perspective
2. The poet's perspective
3. The narrator's perspective
4. The reader's perspective

One may further suggest that perhaps we should distinguish between the narrator as a fictional character or, for that matter, a voice that partakes in the story and the author, Čapek himself. However, for the purposes of the current discussion there is no need to get into such fine distinctions.

The Investigator's Perspective

The investigator is not interested in poetry; his concern focuses on the brute, solid facts of the accident, and only in those facts that are relevant for finding the hitting car and pressing charges against the reckless driver. He is not interested in impressions, emotions or even the injury caused by the accident. The victim's perspective, that of the old drunken beggarwoman, is not presented in the story. She was hit by car, taken to hospital, and that's all we know about her. Her fate becomes immaterial.

From the investigator's point of view, the poet and the poem are valued only for their potential to provide the crucial information. Luckily, they do. One may argue, that the investigator does not even see the poem as such but rather as a string of words that may or may not be relevant to his interest. Yet, as the investigator and the poet read on the string of words turns into a meaningful poetic image. The investigator must have perceived this image and its inner connections, otherwise he would not be able to extract from it the desired information. Indeed, he attends to the poem only because it was written immediately after the accident, presumably as a reaction to it; nonetheless, he is forced to read it *as a poem* in order to achieve his goal. The investigator has no aesthetic

cognitivism in mind nor is he eager to answer the general question: what can we learn from poetry? In his perspective, one can learn something from anything, and the question is only: what object could provide the relevant information in a given context? No method of investigation assures the finding of the required details. It is a matter of chance, intuition and persistence⁸. Knowledge is not restricted to certain objects nor assured by others. You never know until you know; therefore, keep trying. The investigator who leaves no stone, or in this case, no word, unturned is indeed reworded. Does it mean that poetry or art in general always guarantee this kind of knowledge? Of course not.

At the end of the story, when the poet, who gets excited by the fact that his poem was found useful and worthy of attention, asks: “would you like me to read you a couple of other poems?” to which the investigator replies: “Some other time [...] when I have another case.” Are we, the readers, supposed to hold that the investigator believes that he found a safe method for solving his cases? Will he, from now on, search for poems to facilitate his crime investigations? Surely not. But, at the same time, it is clear that he would not entirely rule it out if he were to stumble on a poem that is somehow connected to his case. He is neither an aesthetic cognitivist nor a non-cognitivist; he is simply not interested in art per se, although he cannot avoid attending to it. He has learned that useful knowledge can be found even in an obscure poem.

The Poet's Perspective

This perspective is almost the opposite to that of the investigator. The poet is not interested in brute facts, or so he says; indeed, he scarcely notices them. When the investigator asks him about the car he replies: “I never pay attention to details.” Can this be true? Of course not! One cannot survive without paying attention to details in one's surrounding. Yet, people differ in their interests and perceptions, and their attentions may differ accordingly. Taking this into account we may surmise that the poet meant that he is not paying attention to the “ordinary” kind of details, those details that are normally expected to draw the attention of most people in similar situations. Moreover, the poet must have noticed some details at the

⁸ Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is known for obtaining useful information from unexpected sources. He sees hints and clues in apparently banal and marginal facts that no one else would notice or suspect. We may assume that Holmes, like Čapek's investigator, is not interested in poetry as such, but would not dismiss its potential for providing useful knowledge in certain cases.

scene of the accident, otherwise from where did he get those curious images that entered the poem? The poet himself claims that something must have been there, “Or why else would it be here?” This clearly indicates that the poet saw the license plate, but perceived the numbers as images in his peculiar poetic way. We could say that the poet saw the numbers *as* images, although he probably did not think of himself in terms of *seeing as*, but more likely in terms of *seeing that*⁹. It may be argued that the poet's initial standpoints is close to non-cognitivism, that is, he does not view his poem as a source of knowledge, but rather as a beautiful composition of images and impressions. Yet, his position is not entirely unambiguous.

Notice that the poet does bring up the issue of his poem when the investigator begins to question him. This suggests that the poet suspected that the poem may be of some relevance and carry useful information. However, he immediately dismisses the idea and objects to the investigator's interest in the poem. “It's nothing,” says the poet. In fact, it is the investigator's persistence that leads the poet to revise his position and gradually take interest in disclosing the concealed factual details embedded in the poem. Interestingly, both the poet and the investigator modify their initial standpoints and then, through a dialogue, influence each other in the process of decoding the poem. They both learn something new about poetry and its capacity to serve as a source of knowledge.

It is indicative that after decoding the poem and deciphering the numbers comprising the license plate, the poet proudly declares that the line, “swan's neck bosom drum and cymbal,” is the best part of the poem. Ironically, we—the readers—surmise that the investigator agrees with the poet for entirely different reasons. The poet marvels the beauty of the images, but one cannot help thinking that this beauty is now affected and enriched by the discovery of the new layer found in this line. Put differently, the fact that the poetic images were found helpful and informative enhances their beauty. Thus, the poem before and after its decoding is not the same poem, or at least its artistic value is not the same in the eyes of the poet himself. He rediscovers his own work and learns to appreciate it anew. It is not unusual for an artist to reevaluate her own work after reflecting on it from a different perspective or gaining additional information. Knowledge matters in art just as it does in other areas, not because it *should* matter, but because our perception is

⁹ This brings to mind Wittgenstein's famous distinction between *seeing X* and *seeing X as* (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953, IIxi).

influenced, for better or for worse, by what we have come to know. The awareness of new layers or additional information does not necessarily result in higher appreciation; it may also have a negative effect. Perhaps, the more one knows, the more critical one gets? Be it as it may, knowledge is effective. In the case of the poet the effect is positive. He learns something new about his own poem while examining it from the investigator's perspective and he is also impressed and influenced by the investigator's contentment. The poet reveals a new cognitive value in his poem, a value he probably would not have been aware of otherwise. Ironically, he discovers the charm of external reality through the encounter with a person who does not care for the poet's inner reality.

At the outset the poet believed that "inner reality" is all that matters in poetry. Indeed, one may argue that "inner reality" carries its own cognitive value. This value may be something like what Aristotle had in mind, and may also be, as the poet himself puts it, the knowledge of "surreal images which reality evokes in the subconscious of the poet." Like dreams, poems may be read as a key to the subconscious. Is this an important kind of knowledge from a poetic-artistic perspective? Maybe it is, maybe it isn't; but even if it is not important it still is effective once it is present in the mind of the reader. Readers and critics often read poems with this goal in mind, namely, to uncover the "inner reality" of the poet; if it is not the subconsciousness of the poet himself, it is an abstract or ideal or imaginary subconsciousness that throws light on the understanding of our "inner reality" as conscious beings. It may touch upon psychological, metaphysical and religious aspects.

As noted before, the perspective of the accident's victim does not play a role in the story. Her poetic representation is a far cry from her description earlier in the story: "Our great love sprawls in dust / a girl a broken blossom." The investigator wonders about this image, because to him she is nothing but a drunken beggarwoman. The poet replies: "I wouldn't write about a drunken beggarwoman [...] She was simply a woman, you see?" And once again the poet demonstrates that his way of viewing external reality is different from that of the investigator. The latter considers the victim a social problem that is bound to get into trouble, and perhaps she is partly to be blamed for the accident. The poet sees a "broken blossom," an innocent victim. Is the poet entirely wrong? Is it simply a matter of true or false information, or is it a matter of different ways of looking at the world?

In how many ways can a poem be read? How many different kinds of knowledge may it reveal? Is this solely a

matter of the poem on its own, or does it also depend on the reader's point of view? One thing is certain, one's perspective influences the attention paid to details in or out of the poem; different perspectives bring to the surface different kinds of knowledge.

The Narrator's Perspective

The narrator's perspective is more sophisticated and reflective than those of his fictional characters. The narrator observes both the investigator and the poet, and compares their reactions. Does the narrator side with one of them? I believe that she understands both and sides indeed with both; her emphasis is on the tension between the two contrasting perspectives and on their mutual interactions. For a moment it seems that the narrator has resolved this tension by uniting the two realities, by bringing both sides to a similar understanding and appreciation of the complexity of poetry. But this is just a momentary impression. The two readers are happy to "crack" the poem and reveal the sought-after facts. Both have come to see in the poem something that was not apparent before; the "external" and the "inner" realities, so it seems, become one. When the investigator tells the poet that the hitting car was found and that the poem was a helpful source of information, the poet replies happily: "So you see, here you have inner reality." For a moment the poet believes that his poetry won the interest of the investigator and that he has found a new devoted poetry lover. But since the investigator abruptly declines the poet's offer to read some more of his poems, the illusion is shattered. The narrator intensifies this understanding by informing the reader that the investigator's reply was given "without hesitation", that is, not even for a moment did the investigator abandon his clear preference for external reality; not for a moment was the investigator converted into poetry lover. Indeed, both sides learned about poetry, but, as the narrator implies, this knowledge did not change their initial perspectives and interests; it only revealed for each of them a new vehicle for attaining their goals. Both may wait eagerly for another unlikely occasion to exercise the new practice of decoding poems.

Does the narrator appreciate the poem's artistic value? Does she believe in the power of poetry to represent inner reality? Does she seriously believe in the existence of both realities? The narrator doesn't give the readers clear indications as to her standpoint. Still, the irony which emerges at the end of the story may suggest an intentional ambiguity, namely, the tension between the two perspectives is there to stay; no "happily ever after" is faithful to real life, call it external or inner reality. The narrator observes both sides with sympathy and humor,

perhaps even with a grain of sadness. Although it is not stated, the narrator makes it quite clear that the poet is disappointed at the end of the story, realizing that the investigator is not interested after all in his poetry. It seems that the narrator sympathizes with the poet and has no intention to ridicule him for his unrealistic expectations, yet she keeps an ironic distance. To be sure, as a narrator she must be an art lover and a believer in its power, “or why else”, as the poet asks earlier in the story, “would ... [the story] be here?”

Does the narrator believe that his story teaches something about human nature? I believe he does. Does he believe that the knowledge of actual facts matters? I believe that he plays with the idea both ways, turns it upside down, so that only a vague, undecided complex “yes and no” can be given to this question. This too can be considered either a poetic or a realist’s truth. Judging by Čapek’s other stories, this is probably his general perception of human situation, but for the present purposes we need not go deeper into this issue.

The Reader’s Perspective

This perspective depends, of course, on who the reader is. The ideal reader is a fictional entity, not very helpful for descriptive purposes¹⁰. My point does not depend on a specific reading; on the contrary, it has to do with the possibility of different approaches, just as Čapek’s story portrays.

The reader of “The Poet”, any reader, is presented with the tension between the contrasting interests of the fictional characters. The reader may be more sympathetic towards the poet or towards the investigator; the reader may believe in poetic inner reality or dismiss it altogether; alternatively, the reader may adopt the reflective approach of the narrator. What can the reader learn from the story?

Adopting the poet’s initial perspective, the reader may view the story as an “inner reality”, an artistic image that need not be faithful to facts, but perhaps demonstrates different ways of interpreting brute facts. The reader may learn from the story about the tension between the two perspectives and may agree or disagree with the effectiveness of this distinction. The reader may adopt an Aristotelian like approach and think of the story as

¹⁰ Although the notion of *ideal reader* is long out of fashion and is not discussed in contemporary literature as it used to be half a century ago, normative theories imply, consciously or not, a reader that follows the normative pattern and appreciates art for the *relevant* aspects.

manifestation of a possibility that enhances conflicting interests in general or, specifically, the conflict between poetical and factual perspectives. The reader may agree that the story is indeed a successful manifestation of the conflict. The reader may or may not imagine the scenes, the characters, their tone of voice, their gestures and more, in order to examine the effectiveness of the story through a more direct experience¹¹. The reader may turn to other stories by Čapek in order to learn about the author’s style and viewpoint, and evaluate ‘The Poet’ in the light of these findings. The reader may go beyond the literary text and research the author’s biography hoping to disclose biographical events that initiated this particular story. Indeed, some professional critics do exactly this, namely, they study the life of the artist in terms of personal, historical, psychological and cultural background in order to make sense of her work, or go the other way around and attempt to learn about the artist’s inner or external reality via his art. In short, the reader may adopt different positions towards the story, and unless the reader has to write a book report or take an exam within the framework of a specific literary school, the reader is entirely free to bring to the story whatever she has and to take from the story whatever she can.

Conclusion

William Blake may be right in declaring that we can “see a World in a Grain of Sand.” Perhaps we can; the brute fact is, however, that we don’t, or at least I don’t. How much of the world do we actually see in a grain of sand? That depends on the viewer and the circumstances. Some see more than others. An archeologist may see in a piece of clay a whole period of history. I have to be deeply interested, willing to learn a lot and be patient and observant in order to see it in a similar way. In most cases I just take the archeologist’s word for it.

In the domain of art things are somewhat different, because knowledge on its own does not determine artistic value. Indeed, a reader may “see [almost] a world” in a story. This “world,” however, depends on the reader’s background, previous knowledge, values and sensitivity. Different readers may thus perceive different “worlds” in the same story. One thing is common to all: knowledge influences appreciation; be it the previous knowledge that

¹¹ This touches on the debate concerning imagination and its role in fiction. Gaut, for one, holds, that the cognitive value of the work is closely associated with its ability to evoke imagination (*Idem.*, 2006). On the role of imagination in fiction see also Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, and the Symposium on this book in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 59 (2), 2019: 197–225.

has been brought to the reading process or knowledge obtained from the story. Cognitive values influence artistic/aesthetic values in many ways because they partake in the overall perception of the story; they do not, however, determine them. There is a crucial difference between *influencing* appreciation and *determining* it. Knowledge per se does not, on its own, determine artistic value. A reader may consider the novelty of the idea embedded in the story, or learn some historical facts via the story and yet think that the story is too sketchy or too manipulative. Another reader may enjoy the humor and the portrayal of the protagonists but deny the effectiveness and novelty of the knowledge it conveys.

My theory of aesthetic order is descriptive¹². One of its main points is that aesthetic order is highly sensitive to context including the viewer and his background. Aesthetic order has no external laws or fixed norms that determine its conditions and evaluative standard. It is an inner order constructed by the relations and interactions of the components of the individual work. The sensitivity of aesthetic order may explain how is it possible that a person returning to a story he read ten years ago may modify his artistic appreciation of the story. The components that partake and construct the particular order of the story are not always similarly perceived by different readers or by the same reader in different circumstances. Which reading is the correct one? Does increase in knowledge assure the validity of appreciation? Is an older and wiser person necessarily a better reader than a young enthusiastic one?

Knowledge is a component that interacts with other components of the work. It may be significant in appreciating one work and less significant in another. It is not a matter of norms but a matter of the complex interplay of the components as well as the perspective of the reader. Whatever one knows and whatever one perceives in the work influences one's appreciation even if one is not fully aware of this influence.

Indeed, aesthetic order is not only affected by knowledge, it also exhibits internal cognitive value, since high aesthetic order is marked by high informative value. Informative value indicates the degree of surprise, novelty or originality of the work. A good story is highly informative, in the sense that it is unexpected and cannot be reduced to a certain principle or pattern. This is clearly seen in metaphors. A good, effective metaphor draws our attention to new meaningful combinations between familiar elements and thus facilitates their new

perception. An overused metaphor loses its informative value and becomes a linguistic coin of lower informative value; it loses its novelty and its power to evoke attention.

Good works of art make us see unexpected combinations of high informative value. Are these the possibilities that Aristotle had in mind, or are these qualities of an inner world? Be that as it may, the idea of high informative value as a mark of artistic value seemingly supports aesthetic cognitivism. However, this kind of value diminishes its power when its information is abstracted, turned into a rule and expected to be applicable in other cases. In spite of its high informative value, a great work of art cannot teach us how to create another great work of art and does not provide us with a lesson that is applicable beyond the boundaries of the specific work. This is then a point in favor of non-cognitivism.

I distance myself from both positions, aesthetic cognitivism and non-cognitivism, not because they do not facilitate rich, deep and enlightening discussions—they do, unquestionably. My problem is with the normative approach that overlooks the variety of actual experience and perspectives. Norms, in my view, are justified and necessary for social life, even if the debate over them goes forever, and even if they can never be sufficiently substantiated. But when it comes to art, I prefer a descriptive theory which struggles with a variety of brute facts concerning artistic appreciation, that is, a theory that admits and considers differences in perspectives as indicative of the nature of art appreciation.

In my view, philosophical reflections should observe and seek to make sense of the actual variety without ruling out parts of it on the basis of theoretical considerations. This does not mean that I do not have my own taste and standards of learning and appreciating art, only that I do not believe that philosophy can be helpful in substantiating them. Furthermore, I admit that the boundaries between the normative and the descriptive are not unambiguous. No theory is completely normative without descriptive components, nor is any descriptive theory completely unaffected by normativity. It is rather a matter of tendency, emphasis and declared goals. The actual world is far from our wishful thinking and perfect orders, and this too is an observation learned through experience and reading stories.



¹² See footnote 5.