

The Centrality of Art in Classic American Philosophy

Victorino Tejera

Despite its popular reputation for vulgar pragmatism, classic American philosophy since Peirce has always taken art to be of prime importance in understanding the human condition. While this may be no surprise to most historians of ideas, it may well be news to our modern practitioners of philosophy, given that in phenomenology the art object is turned into a “cognitive” object and that, in analytic philosophy, art is the last and least of subject-matters. Moreover, analytic aesthetics defines itself as the study, not of art, but of the language in which we discuss art.¹ A cognitive object, in today’s philosophical climate, is something “known” in the sense that the objects of the special sciences are said to be known. And this is the usage that has created an unquestioned contrast between objects of knowledge and objects of appreciation, as if appreciation was not also—like art itself—a matter of reflection.

Thus, the writings of C. S. Peirce, founder of a pragmatic modern theory of signs, show that, as early as age eighteen, Peirce had a good sense of the implications that art has for the philosophic understanding of the human condition. In a note of 1857 he refuted Schiller’s careless claim that “the sense of beauty never furthered the performance of a single act of duty,” by showing that beauty “places the mind in a state of ‘infinite determinableness’ so that it can turn in any direction and is in perfect freedom; hence, beauty is in the highest degree fruitful with respect to knowledge and morality.”² While another note of the same year concluded that Michaelangelo was guided in his art by *intellectuality* in contrast to Raphael, whose art came out of his *sensibility*, Peirce never made the sharp distinction between sense and intellect which both rationalism and empiricism had bequeathed to the Idealist tradition. We note that craft, or artisanship, and mechanical invention are aerily relegated, by this overdrawn distinction, to a station beneath philosophy.

Historically, the deep background that reinforced this blind spot and kept it from being questioned was the Stoics banishment of poetics and rhetoric from the divisions of philosophy. This meant that the arts of making and of producing effects—arts that every real construction must use—were now beyond self-reflection or foundational thought. Despite the concerns of Plato's *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus* or *Hippias Major* and Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, and to the great impoverishment of European thought, the Stoics reduced the subject-matter of philosophy to physics, logic and ethics. The effect of this impoverishment can be seen in such would-be inclusive transmitters of the classical heritage as Christian Wolff (1679-1754).³ Wolff bequeathed to A. Baumgarten (1714-62) and Immanuel Kant the idea of an aesthetics in which feeling processes can be, and mostly are, *purely* sensory, i.e., purged of "intellection," as the conceptual dimension of human intellect had come to be called. We must say at once that this is an *infirm* idea. Meantime neither the wave of Hegelianism that swept nineteenth-century intellectual America nor the renewed study of Kant did much to heal this infirmity—despite the flourishing state of the mechanical arts and the new profitability of inventiveness in America. More exactly, idealist thought in America did not do much for the arts until the arrival of such American readers of Kant and Hegel as C. S. Peirce, John Dewey and George Santayana.

In Aristotle, human selectivity or responsiveness, i.e., all intellectual process, comes under the notion of *dianoia*, namely, thinking or reflecting. Artistic production and performance, human practices such as politics and surgery, are all special but real knowledges; they are different kinds of knowledge, *not* inferior degrees of it as defined by the conceptualists. These activities, of course, involve feeling, either in the way of using, giving shape to, or informing it; or else, of producing it for specific purposes. Neither Aristotle nor any of the pre-Hellenistic Greeks radically separated *aisthêsis* (perceiving) from *noêsis* (minding, thinking of) in the way that fourth century Pythagoreans, Alexandrians and Neoplatonists were to separate them. When, for example, Homer portrayed Odysseus as longing to see the smoke rising from his homestead in Ithaca again, the verb he used was a form of *noein*: Odysseus's *noêma*, here, is clearly something *felt* and something *sensed* as well as something *known*. It is this fusion, or overlap, of aesthetic (sensory) with noetic (thinking) processes that I have sought to restore to pre-Hellenistic thought from Parmenides to Aristotle, as an inheritance from J. H. Randall and classic American philosophy.⁴ Classic American philosophy has always, from Peirce to Randall and Buchler, avoided dissociating intellect and emotion in the way that has led to the impasses that plague both British empiricism and continental European philosophy. American philosophic historians, consequently, do not read back into Parmenides, Plato or Aristotle the separation of feeling from reason that first gained currency among post-Classical thinkers in the West.

Similarly, the point of Peirce's paragraph 5.501 is that the medieval scholastic logicians attributed to concepts the very same characters that he attributes to qualities of feeling, and that feelings are general in reference, in the same way that

concepts are.⁵ Peirce is not just reminding us, at 5.283, that feelings accompany thought, but that feelings are signs, namely, have reference or meaning:

whenever we think, we have present to the consciousness some feeling, image, conception, or other representation which serves as a sign . . . it follows from our existence that everything . . . present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves. This does not prevent its being a phenomenon of something without us, just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and the rain. When we think, then, we ourselves as we are at that moment, appear as a sign. Now a sign has, as such, three references: first it is a sign **to** some thought which interprets it; second, it is a sign **for** some object to which in that thought it is the equivalent; third, it is a sign, **in** some respect or quality, which brings it into connection with its object

In paragraph 1.313, tones and colors are said to be signs, respectively, of qualities of feeling or moods:

A mere presentment may be a sign. . . . Some colors are called gay, others sad. . . . tones are signs of visceral qualities of feeling. . . . odors are particularly apt to act as signs [by] natural associations of different ideas.

In the next note (1.314) Peirce makes the point that we know that people's feelings about a given thing can be similar. And at 5.475 Peirce adds that some signs have what he calls "emotional interpretants;" and these may be "more than a feeling of recognition." He says, further, that the emotional interpretant is sometimes the **only** proper signification of a sign: "the performance of a piece of . . . music is a sign. It conveys, and is intended to convey . . . musical ideas; [and] these usually consist . . . in a series of feelings." Since interpretants are themselves signs, we see that emotions are signs, and as significations they convey something even when "only" effects. It is also clear that musical feelings are of the nature of ideas for Peirce. Thus we can make sense of his remark, at 5.434, that "the reasonable purport of a word is not the only kind of meaning there is."⁶ Now, signs **need** not be always interpreted pragmatically; for, they are not always acted upon at once or in practice—as beliefs are in the pragmatic account. It is indeed the pragmatic view that the meaning of an idea is to be found in its consequences. But just as a concept is not the less a concept because it is not acted upon, so feelings are not the less signs because they have consequences—as in listening to music—that need not be acted upon at once.

Not only must we grant that Peirce's theory of signs is comprehensive, but his conception of knowledge will be seen as wider than that of the Stoics, Platonists, positivists and phenomenologists. It is consonant with this breadth

that Peirce explicitly states in his definition of logic as the science of inquiry that “Ethics or the science of right and wrong, must appeal to Esthetics for aid in determining the . . . greatest good.” He also states that while logic “also depends upon phenomenology and . . . mathematics,” as “the theory of self-controlled, or deliberate, thought, [logic] as such must appeal to ethics for its principles” (1.191). It is aesthetics, then, that is presupposed by ethics and logic, and not logic that is presupposed by aesthetics, as contemporary Anglo-Analytic philosophers mistakenly maintain. We are also forced to note that “science,” here, must include—as in Aristotle—other species of knowledge than the theoretical.⁷ In the above, we recognize something akin and basic to Santayana’s ideas on the relations between morality and aesthetics. Since it is our feelings, not something external, says Santayana, that gives the world of perception its value:

philosophers ought *not* to feel that unless moral and aesthetic judgments are expressions of objective truth . . . not merely expressions of human nature, they stand condemned of hopeless triviality; on the contrary, triviality consists in abstraction from human interests . . .⁸

As Santayana says, “for the existence of good *in any form* it is not merely consciousness but emotional consciousness that is needed.”⁹ In any case, both aesthetic and moral judgments are judgments of value for Santayana; they contrast with judgments of fact. The value of the latter is *only* derivative or, as we now say, only instrumental; namely, a fact takes on value when judged to be a good means to a given end.¹⁰ Morality, Santayana suggests, is mainly concerned with the prevention of suffering. Accordingly, while “aesthetic judgments are mainly perceptions of good, moral judgments are mainly and fundamentally negative, or perceptions of evil.”¹¹

Santayana’s *Reason in Art*, with its definition of “art” as the *principle* of art activity, not only its product, provides very strong evidence for my argument. “Any operation which . . . humanizes and rationalizes objects is called art.” Note that it is not only artfulness that must be analyzed to understand art and invention or construction in technology and the sciences; but Santayana is also saying that art is the very motor and principle of civilization itself. “Until art arises, all achievement . . . dies with the individual, and even in him spends itself without recovery, like music heard in a dream.” It is art that is transmissible and makes possible “the sustained advance in rationality” that creates civilization: “progress is art bettering the conditions of existence.”¹²

Rational progress can be hoped for because, just as *art* “perpetuates its own function” and requires a medium (as Dewey was to emphasize later), so “*mind* grows self-perpetuating only by its expression in matter.”¹³ But rationality can only be itself as a fusion of “impulse and ideation.” A divorce of these two “would reduce man to a brute or a maniac. The rational animal is generated by the union of these two monsters.”¹⁴ For, “reason and humanity begin with the union of

instinct and ideation.” If the life of impulse could be perfectly coordinated with the life of reflection,

intelligence would be at once the universal method of practice and its continual reward. All reflection would then be applicable in action, and all action fruitful in happiness.¹⁵

In realizing that this can be only an ideal, Santayana notes that nonetheless it is one that all individuals, in fact and at one time or another, partially embody. Having noted that progress is measured only by reference to some ideal, Santayana then remarks that the Positivist philosophers—who claim to believe in progress—lack a positive ideal by which to judge it. In

discard[ing] the [intellectual] machinery in which their ancestors embodied the ideal, they have not perceived that those symbol[ic forms of the ideal] gave fantastic . . . expression to what, in itself, is pure humanity; they have thus remained entangled in the [nominalist] error that ideals are . . . adventitious and unmeaning, not having a soil in mortal life nor a possible fulfillment there.¹⁶

In other words, it is the failure of nonpluralist philosophies to see past philosophic and poetic achievements as intellectual and expressive *constructions* that leads them to think that those constructions are now meaningless. And this, of course, is a failure of both aesthetic and historical sensibility; it is, namely, a philistine failure to respond to the *art* in the intellectual products of the culture that has, in part, produced our own generation.

Similarly, when G. H. Mead’s article on aesthetic experience reiterates his insistence that a sense of the past is required for a good understanding of the present, it also makes the deeper point that the sense of the past *presupposes* the aesthetic sense.¹⁷ Mead does not only deplore the “break” in the Western tradition between the practical and material, on one hand, and the imaginative and spiritual, on the other; he also sees the way in which shared aesthetic experiences spill over into the everyday and into the creation of better realized communities. And this resonates with the idea, implicit in William James’s works, that creativity is a condition of the social process and of man’s survival. Finally, in *Mind, Self, and Society*, Mead analyzes the roles of the “I” and the “me” in the process of creative innovation, and the varying effects produced by the ways in which the “I” and the “me” counterbalance each other in the productive individual. The key, of course, to what makes Mead, and other classic Americans, sensitive not only to the social nature of the individual but also to the aesthetic dimension of experience, is the insight that takes nature and human nature to be constitutive of each other.¹⁸

While the centrality of the arts to philosophy is taken for granted in different but unselfconscious ways by Santayana and Justus Buchler, it is in Dewey’s work

that it becomes a distinctive tenet of American pragmatism. Dewey sought to dissolve the standard misleading discontinuity between “art” and “science,” posited by empiricism and positivism, by articulating the observable connections between art and religion, art and survival, art and everyday life. As he says in *Art as Experience*, neither art, nor science, nor civilization can be understood by “theories which isolate art and its appreciation” from other kinds of human activity.¹⁹ The aesthetic, for Dewey, is a pervasive dimension of human experience. Before they were sectioned off, what we now call art and science were actually—in the history of the development of the arts that Dewey equates with the history of human experience—aspects of one another. These aspects of invention and discovery, of what Aristotle called *technê* (which included *poiêtikê* and *praktikê*), were also pursued separately and for their own sake. But there is as much thinking, or reflection, in the one as the other. Dewey calls the artist’s reflection “medium-bound thinking,” while that of the scientist is both theoretical (in Aristotle’s sense) and experimental or operational. He furthermore insists that “no experience of whatever sort is a unity unless it has esthetic quality.”²⁰ Since art is a kind of making as well as a kind of experience, a human product as well as the very principle of production, and art or the aesthetic are qualities of different kinds of experience as well as themselves special kinds of experience, it becomes possible to propose that artistic activity be taken as a visual model for all other forms of human activity.²¹

Like Dewey, but in a more systematic way, Buchler refuses to give special preference to physical science or its methods as models for other human activities or the quest for knowledge. Inquiry is *only one species* of query, and deduction is only one species of reflection. Action and construction can also be forms of query that seek knowledge. There is as much to be learned about the human condition or the effects of our involvement with nature from reflective conduct or active judgment, from reflective construction or exhibitiv judgment when they are questioning, as there is from the different way in which scientific inquiry questions natural and social processes. But we must understand, Buchler observes, that it is art *as art* and action or performance *as action* that provide knowledge, not the aesthetic object as the object of discourse—as in Roland Barthes—or the aesthetic object transformed into a cognitive object, as in Mikel Dufrenne’s phenomenological aesthetics.²²

In conclusion, I would suggest that these historical observations are both basic and revisionary. They bring back into American philosophic reflection neglected data from the practice of the arts and the experience of creativity, namely, data from the *active* and *exhibitiv* as well as the logical dimensions of human judgment. Awareness of the reflective quality of actions and *in* constructions will not only enrich and clarify current impoverished notions of rationality, by restoring to it its affective and imaginative components, it will close the gap between professional students of “pure thought” and thinkers in other fields than philosophy. And it will do this by reawakening in us a sense of the creative quality present in *all* the distinctively human activities, from science to surgery, from

poetry to politics, from sport and entertainment to the giving of form to our daily lives. In connection with the current excess of logicism in philosophy and its almost exclusive concern with “language,” it is not just that the assertive or logical model of language ceases to serve philosophy, but that philosophy itself can now be seen to be not just a matter of clarity and consistency only, but rather as a way of sensitizing us to the polysemy of language, namely, to the multiple significations of words in discourse that is not scientific. Philosophy must also address the many ways of achieving coherence that can be found in practice, in artisanship or productivity, all of which show the model of consistency that is derived from the theoretical sciences to be just one among other species of coherence.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* 1953, tr. E. Casey (New Haven, 1973); Joseph Margolis, *The Language of Art and Art Criticism* (Detroit, 1965); Margolis, “Recent Work in Aesthetics,” 52-74, with rejoinder by Victorino Tejera, “Contemporary Trends in Aesthetics: Underlying Issues,” in M. Lipman, *Contemporary Aesthetics* (Boston, 1973), 74-80. The intellectual historian is forced to note that the label of “Anglo-American” that Margolis equates with “recent work” is not only historically misleading because he in fact overlooks American works in English [such as Willard Arnett, *Santayana and the Sense of Beauty* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1955), Eugene Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1962) Arturo Fallicos, *Art & Existentialism* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), John F. Taylor, *Design and Expression in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1964), Victorino Tejera, *Art and Human Intelligence* (New York, 1965), Albert Hofstadter, *Truth and Art* (New York, 1965), Rudolph Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley, 1971)], but also because the term “Anglo-American” (as used by analyticists) automatically suppresses reference to non-analyticist American work.
2. *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, Chronological Edition, I, ed. Max Fisch (Bloomington, Indiana, 1982 to date), 12F.
3. But it is interesting to note that American Puritanism, in Jonathan Edwards at least, was exempt from this impoverishment. We find him affirming (somewhat like Nietzsche later) that it is [the] beauty [of the world] that makes life bearable to men, and (ii) noting (somewhat like Plato’s Socrates) that ideas are also beautiful and bring their own kind of pleasure: *Works* 6, *Writings on Science and Philosophy* (New Haven, 1980).
4. See John Herman Randall, *Aristotle* (New York, 1960), and my *The City-State Foundations of Western Political Thought* (Lanham, Maryland, 1984) and also “Intellectual History as a Tool of Philosophy,” in *History and Anti-History in Philosophy* (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 1989), 122-134.
5. *Collected Papers* 8 vols., C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss & E. Burks, eds., (Cambridge, Mass., 1931-1958). References (such as this one) to this edition of Peirce’s works give first the volume number, and, after the dot, the passage number.
6. This point should not be missed by linguisticist and neopositivist readers of Peirce.
7. This broader conception of science is common to most other classic American philosophers; but the demonstration of this is beyond the scope of this essay. See, however, my *History as a Human Science: The Conception of History in some Classic American Philosophers* (Lanham, Maryland, 1984), for an introduction to the question with reference to Santayana and Buchler, Schneider and Lamprecht, for example.
8. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty* 1896 (New York, 1936), 5.
9. *Ibid.*, 16.
10. *Ibid.*, 19.
11. *Ibid.*, 19.
12. *The Life of Reason* 1905-06 (New York, rev.ed. 1954), 301-2.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 17.
15. *Ibid.*, 16.
16. *Ibid.*, 19-20.
17. George Herbert Mead, “The Nature of Aesthetic Experience,” 1925, repr. in *Selected Writings*, Andrew Reck, ed., (Chicago, 1964), 294-305.
18. For George Herbert Mead’s pragmatist insights into the pervasiveness of the aesthetic, and the continuity between man and nature, see *The Philosophy of the Present*, (14 and passim); and *The Philosophy of the Act*, chapters XXII, XXIII, and XXXI.

19. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, 1934), 10.
20. *Ibid.*, 47. We note that Maurice Merlau-Ponty says that situations only need to have a “thetic” quality to become determinate, where Dewey requires them to have *aesthetic* quality. Merlau-Ponty’s formulation unnoticedly purges the determinateness of situations of the feelings that are at work in them. *Phenomenologie de la Perception* 1945, tr. Colin Smith (London and New York 1962).
21. As is done, for instance, in V. Tejera’s *Art and Human Intelligence* (New York, 1965).
22. Roland Barthes *The Fashion System* 1967, tr. Ward & Howard (New York, 1983); Mikel Dufrenne *Phenomenologie de l’Experience Esthetique* 1953, tr. E. Casey (Evanston, Illinois, 1973).