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Science, or Genius?

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Arthur Schopenhauer distinguishes art from science in a variety of ways, thereby concluding that art is superior, and that it is in fact the work of genius. (164) This is not an uncommon thread within the period of romanticism, where even poets such as Blake (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*) believe that the imagination supercedes reason. Within the scope of Schopenhauer's argument, he considers the imagination, madness, the sublime, and the difference between *idea* and *concept* in order to illustrate the so-called limitations of pure reason based knowledge. What is still more fascinating and quite questionable, is that he concludes with an actual ranking of various artistic forms. Though it is clear that Schopenhauer's purpose is to distinguish and elevate the genius from the mere man of science, I feel as though the distinctions separating these disciplines are not as clear as is suggested. What is even more questionable in my eyes, is why Schopenhauer makes such a claim in the first place. Does he consider himself an artist/genius? What are the implications of his argument in either case?

Schopenhauer begins by initially stating what is at the core of both science and art. Science as he states, follows "the principle of sufficient reason in its different forms, and their theme remains the phenomenon, its laws, connexion, and the relations resulting from these." Art on the other hand, is a

"kind of knowledge that considers what continues to exist outside and independently of all relations, but which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the *Ideas* that are the immediate and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself." (164)

He goes on to state that the only source for art is the knowledge of Ideas, and that its sole aim is the communication of this, which leads us to a discussion on Schopenhauer's depiction of genius. As he states, it is only through pure contemplation that can become absorbed entirely in the *object* that Ideas are comprehended. It is this contemplation that is described as genius.

What is of key importance here is that this gift of genius is an *objective* tendency of the mind, and further that it involves the "ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality." (165)

This in fact turns to a discussion of the *imagination*, since Schopenhauer claims this to be an essential part of genius, though not identical to it. "Thus imagination extends the mental horizon of the genius beyond the objects that actually present themselves to his person, as regards both quality and quantity." (166) Such a distinction is not at all clear to me however. The claim is made that there are two possibilities in perceiving an imaginary object. The first of these is considered as a means to knowledge of the Idea. This is the case of genius. The second possibility involves constructing the imagination "to one's own whim", which does not contribute to knowledge of the Idea, but rather it is only the relations of the constructed phantasms that can be known. It appears as though a contradiction is made here. If the goal of art (i.e., the work of genius) is to be completely objective, and "that which is subject to no change, and is therefore known with equal truth for all time", how is it that constructing what seem to be subjective imaginary constructs conform to this rule? At best, it would seem as though the line separating the perceptions that contribute to the knowledge of the idea from those that do not is quite arbitrary, since according to Schopenhauer, it is only those of genius who can really understand anything regarding these ideas. At worst, it seems as though Schopenhauer in fact reverses these distinctions. Consider the case in history where man believed that the earth

was flat. Undoubtedly, each of us would consider the man who discovered the earth's true spherical quality to be a man of *science*. Though we would consider him a genius based on *our* terminology (thereby lumping him with the likes of Newton, Galileo, and Einstein), he would probably not be considered as such according to Schopenhauer's stipulations. It would seem as though it is *precisely* knowledge of the Idea that was gained in this case however, and it is quite problematic to suggest that such a discovery could in fact be 'subject to change'. It should be quite clear that this is a mistake.

Schopenhauer continues with what constitutes another serious blunder: "men of great artistic genius have no aptitude for mathematics; no man was ever very distinguished in both at the same time." Similarly, distinguished mathematicians have little susceptibility to works of fine art. (168) This appears quite problematic, for surely cases exist where both notions are quite compatible. Consider the works of M.C. Escher for instance, where I am thinking of the various black and white drawings of birds or staircases. Such works obviously seem to have geometrical roots, which leads me to believe that artists might have (at least the possibility for) a superb underlying notion of mathematics. But the distinction Schopenhauer attempts to make is that men of science tend to be *rational*, while those of genius are *irrational*: "we seldom find great genius united with pre-eminent rationality; on the contrary, men of genius are often subject to violent emotions and irrational passions." (169) But where would Schopenhauer place Leonardo da Vinci in this schema? This undisputedly skilled painter, engineer, musician, and scientist¹ breaks the mold. Would Schopenhauer concede that, in fact, genius and science are alarmingly compatible, or would he simply ignore this case as a rarity, thereby confirming his own theory? I would suspect the latter, though I would also question how often these disciplines can, and do in fact, coexist. Consider the well-known studies of individuals who study music at an early age.

Statistics consistently show that these individuals tend to perform quite well in mathematics at a later age, which strikes a serious blow to Schopenhauer's theory. What would distinguish the predominant tendencies of rationality or irrationality in these cases?

This leads us further to a discussion of *madness*, and how this relates to the man of genius. "Finally, they are inclined to soliloquize, and in general may exhibit several weaknesses that actually are closely akin to *madness*." (169) The interesting illustration in this case is that of the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. Once freed from his restraints inside the cave, the prisoner (the genius) is allowed to see true sunlight, and experience things (reality) as they really are. Yet once he returns to the cave, he is ridiculed for his mistakes (by the men of science), as he can no longer see things as they used to be. A more typical example might be that of magic. Suppose you were at a magic show, and were somehow able to learn the methods behind one of the tricks. In this case you would have an immediate knowledge of reality, while others would not. You would then be doubtful of any further magic tricks, and therefore be ostracized by the believers.

Schopenhauer briefly concedes that "a correct and distinct conception of what really distinguishes the sane from the insane, has never yet been found." (170) He also mentions that memory is a key issue in the nature of madness, referring to the "impossibility of a uniformly coherent recollection of the past" (171). Though these notions attempt to link the root of madness to problems with memory, they do not appear to be crucial in the overall scheme of Schopenhauer's argument, so I will not elaborate on them.

What does appear to be a crucial element is the fact that ordinary men (non-genius) actually do have the capacity for understanding the beautiful and the *sublime*. "We must therefore assume as existing in all men that power of recognizing in things their Ideas, of

¹ *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third Edition. 1993.

divesting themselves for a moment of their personality, unless indeed there are some who are not capable of any aesthetic pleasure at all." (173) This initially seems to directly refute the earlier claim that mathematicians have little susceptibility to works of fine art. But Schopenhauer continues, and clarifies that the "man of genius excels them only in the far higher degree and more continuous duration of this kind of knowledge." So it is not the case that ordinary men can never appreciate beauty, or see things as they really are, it is just that it is seemingly rare in opposition to the genius. But again, it seems as though this causes some problems. How are we to determine the threshold for deciding what is a layman's degree of comprehension and duration? Does it only occur once a decade? A few times a year? How would this contrast to the man of genius? The distinction is not at all clear, especially considering the example of da Vinci, or the case of our student musicians above.

So, exactly what is the sublime? It is essentially the state of mind where the individual "forcibly tear[s] himself from his will and its relations, and, [gives] himself up entirely to knowledge." (178) It is this case where the individual experiences the sublime, while the object that causes this state is also referred to as the sublime. This is contrasted to the beautiful, since in this case we must directly confront the object with the will, which results in several degrees or transitions to the beautiful. (179) "Knowledge of the beautiful always supposes, simultaneously and inseparably, a purely knowing subject and a known Idea as object." (183)

"The truth which lies at the foundation of all the remarks we have so far made on art is that the object of art, the depiction of which is the aim of the artist, and the knowledge of which must consequently precede his work as its germ and source, is an Idea, in Plato's sense, and absolutely nothing else; not the particular thing, the object of common apprehension, and not the concept, the object of rational thought and of science." (186)

This depiction leaves us with two simple facts: 1) *Ideas* refer to art. 2) *Concepts* refer to science. Schopenhauer further states that "the **concept** is abstract, discursive, wholly undetermined within its sphere, determined only by its limits, attainable and intelligible only to him who has the faculty of reason", whereas **ideas** are "absolutely perceptual, and thoroughly definite. It is never known by the individual as such, but only by him who has raised himself above all willing and all individuality to the pure subject of knowing." (187)

Such a distinction does not seem very clear, and I must still question what differentiates an idea from a concept, and more generally the difference between genius and science. But again, I feel as though Schopenhauer reverses what we would normally expect. Perhaps these definitions will help clear my confusion:

1. objective: Uninfluenced by emotions or personal prejudices. Based on observable phenomena existing in reality.²
2. subjective: Proceeding from or taking place within a person's mind such as to be unaffected by the external world. Existing only in the mind, illusory.³

Is this not contrary to Schopenhauer's characterizations? For in this case, it appears as though science is objective, and art subjective. Surely science deals with observable phenomena, and in the purest sense it is free from emotion or prejudice. On a similar note, we would tend to think that art deals with what is in the mind in most cases, though possibly excluding particular mediums such as photography for example.

But this leads to a brief discussion of how Schopenhauer ranks several mediums of poetry. At the bottom of this scale lies the lyric form, in which the poet describes only his own state and more or less conceals himself behind what is depicted. (190) The ballad is slightly more

² *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third Edition. 1993.

³ *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third Edition. 1993.

objective, continuing on to the idyll and romance, and ending with the drama and tragedy as the most objective form. Schopenhauer does claim that even those who are not of genius can often times produce a beautiful song, when some inspiration enhances his mental powers. (191) This leads me to believe that this is the primary (and possibly only) case where Schopenhauer allows for the understanding of the sublime by the non-genius.

I am puzzled as to why Schopenhauer elevates the artist or genius beyond the man of science in the first place. Does he consider himself an artist/genius? If not, what motivates such a move, given that only the genius can possess and attempt to communicate the described knowledge? It might be summarized by Book V of the Republic:

And who are the true philosophers?

Those who love the sight of truth.⁴

It seems quite plausible that he elevates the genius because he does in fact view himself as such, since “there are very few people who would be able to reach the beautiful itself and see it by itself.” If he didn’t view himself as a man of genius, I would have to seriously question why such a move is made.⁵

⁴ Plato – Complete Works, John M. Cooper. 1997. P1102.

⁵ Plato – Complete Works, John M. Cooper. 1997. P1103.