

Philosophy as Art

In numerous essays, Richard Rorty has proposed that philosophy be considered a form of literature, a particular cultural practice. This essay particularizes that metaphor by proposing another analogy, one that seems to me to capture a great deal of what philosophy is like.¹ Briefly, many puzzling features of philosophy are illuminated by characterizing philosophy as an art-form with many affinities to painting.² I say “illuminated” because it seems unlikely that there is a well-defined natural kind, “philosophy,” even though there are clear cases.

In my undergraduate days, I was torn between my graphic arts/ painting near-major and my philosophy major. Working on a painting seemed, from the inside at least, a great deal like working on a paper. Once I had made the decision about what to go to graduate school in, I continued to be struck by the parallels between these practices and institutions. The resemblance between painting and philosophy seems at least as strong as the relation between science and philosophy, for instance. If we want to ask the question, “What is philosophy?” and want to answer it by saying “Philosophy is a great deal like cultural practice X,” then painting and some other fine arts seem to me to be very good candidates for X.³

We can then return to Rorty’s conception of philosophy as literature and see what kind of “fine arts literature” it is. I will propose that philosophy is a conceptual art-form. Some important features of philosophy, such as intertextuality, are peculiar to philosophy’s status as literature, but others seem not to rely on being linguistic at all. Those are the aspects painting, as non-verbal, makes salient.

I What is Real Painting?

Here is a sketch of some features of the cultural practice of “fine art” painting:⁴

¹ It may be puzzling why a metaphor is needed. We do not seem to have interest in or difficulty saying what refrigerator-moving is or what an accounting is. The problem seems to be that no “empirical” answer—what sorts of things get written and published, who is in what department, etc.—accommodates the feeling that particular institutions are inessential to philosophy.

One view held by many philosophers, sometimes only in their heart of hearts, sometimes overtly as in Heidegger, is that Philosophy has an essence, a special calling. This idea is, of course, absolutely required if one is to hold that only one’s own way of doing philosophy is “real” philosophy.

² In contrast to what, one might ask? One might like to say, “In contrast to science.” But what conception of science does this presuppose? I am not at all confident that the conception of science as dispassionate seeking for the causal underpinnings of the real is complete. Elegant work is appreciated in science as well as in art.

³ In the decades during which I have tried to counsel eager students out of attempting to have a career in philosophy, the striking fact is that people who want to be philosophers are passionate about this desire in a way that you don’t see except among artists and people who like cars. For all I know, this passion for the field, based on little exposure, is just as common in Leisure Studies and Economics. But in my experience, the people who are willing to forego material success for the sake of something, who have day jobs but define themselves as something else, are artists and philosophers.

⁴ Many of the features are true of music, for instance, as well. Controversies and “schools” abound in the arts.

1) Many very good painters, especially since the mid-nineteenth century, became convinced that they and only they are painting in the way painting ought to be done. Especially since the invention of photography, this conviction has often been put as the view that one way of painting “really portrays reality.” Thus the Impressionists, the Pointillistes, the Cubists, and the other schools of modernism argued that only their way of painting, among the ways of painting past and current, captured really true representation.⁵ In general, very, very good and significant painters took themselves to have finally discovered the true painting, the correct way of doing what painting is called upon to do.

Perhaps one should be surprised that there seems to be little correlation between the plausibility of painters’ theorizing about painting and the work that comes out of such theorizing. (Much the same lack of correlation holds between philosophers’ theories about philosophy and the work produced in the light of those theories.)

2) At the same time, most painters have taken their predecessors to be relevant to their practice. Often, this has been because some of what their predecessors did can be understood as in various ways grasping some of the insights these new revolutionaries are finally getting clear about. Meanwhile, even very revolutionary painters recognize that at least some earlier painters were doing really good work. Often, the view is that certain figures are over-rated by benighted moderns, while other greater predecessors have been neglected. Less ideological contemporaries have tended to think that there were many great artists in the past, even though that is not a reason to paint in their way. The history of painting has figured large in painters’ thought and painting.⁶

The admiration for, say, Rembrandt, does not mean that a painter wants to do work that is like Rembrandt’s or that the painter wants to do paintings that are indistinguishable from “new” Rembrandts. “We aren’t doing that anymore.”

3) One of the traditional conceptions of what painting was supposed to do was displaced by photography, starting in the first half of the 19th century. “Representation,” as common-sensically conceived, was no longer the special province of painters and draftsmen, but was much more accurately and reliably achieved by this new practice. The new practice took rather different skills and technology, and did not seem to require the “spiritual insight” that Romantics had come to attribute to painters.

Painters and draftsmen came up with a variety of accounts of kinds of representation that only painters and draftsmen could achieve. The invention of photography seems to correspond pretty well with “theoretical” discussions of what painting should be.

4) Art changes, results are achieved, and problems are solved, but it is not clear that there is “artistic progress” in the sense of getting closer to a goal. There is development

⁵ Theorists of the centrality of “non-representational art” will require a different virtue to describe how their work gets it right.

⁶ Art History is a part of “studio” majors. I can’t think of any other field other than philosophy where the history of the field is a standard part of training for practitioners in the field. Some studio majors would rather just take studio courses, just as some philosophy graduate students would rather just read recent works.

between, say, Botticelli and Monet, but it is difficult to find a scale on which that difference is becoming better art or getting closer to some truth, either about painting or about the world. It is true that certain problems that Botticelli faced had been worked out in the intervening centuries. Various painterly difficulties are solved in various ways through the history of art. Representation of folds, perspective, and how to represent shadow are better handled in some eras than in others, and the techniques accumulate.

But the problems are not problems for anyone but painters—they are problems specific to painting or specific to painting in certain ways. The solutions to some problems, how to represent space, for instance, may not even be relevant to some ways of painting.

While it can happen that a solution to a painterly problem may be applied in other areas of life, and may have great effects on other areas of life, as it is imagined that Goya's work did, these side effects are usually not what interest painters and graphic artists. Paintings that have good effects are perhaps good paintings, but that does not make them good paintings.

II What is Real Philosophy?

This section consists of citing the obvious parallels with the above four remarks about painting, and speculating about why philosophy has these characteristics.

1) Very good philosophers have thought other ways of writing did not really qualify as philosophy, or were seriously and profoundly misguided. The main division today is between the “analytic” and “continental” groups of philosophers. The plausibility and philosophical interest of the “metaphilosophical” writings of philosophers often has little to do with the quality of philosophical work that is produced. Just as one does not have to be a futurist to think highly of Marinetti's work, so one need not hold that Being is the special mission of philosophy to admire Heidegger or be a verificationist to admire Carnap.

2) Most philosophers have taken their predecessors to be relevant to their practice. Often, this is because some of what their predecessors did can be understood as in various ways grasping some of the insights these new revolutionaries are finally getting clear about. In contrast, the history of medicine, of linguistics, of mathematics is relatively irrelevant to the on-going practice of those disciplines.

Why do philosophers read the history of philosophy? My hypothesis is that the history of philosophy contains some fine work. Why is that fine work relevant to contemporary work?

Many answers suggest themselves:

- a) In some loose sense, that in which painters have always dealt with “the same problems” perhaps philosophy always has the same problems. (That is, among the problems that philosophy deals with in a particular culture, some of them are problems that bear some family relationship to problems philosophy dealt with in other cultures.)
- b) Philosophers learn “philosophy appreciation” by studying the history of philosophy. If philosophy is an intertextual literary art, then to learn to do philosophy is to learn some

background texts. There seem (now) to be at least two distinct sets of background texts for Western philosophy, with a substantial overlap from Kant backwards.

One could ask whether there is a single network of texts and what those texts have to be like. This seems to me like asking what the conditions are for a culture to have the literary institution of the novel. Many genres could be enough like “the novel” to be sort of novels.

3) Some hundreds of years ago, by a gradual process, philosophers lost their franchise on knowledge of how things really are. Where Descartes could write on optics and metaphysics, that had ceased to be the case by the time of Kant. Whatever “scientific method” is, the practices of chemists and physicists came to be quite different from those of philosophers. “Getting reality right,” which had seemed to be the calling of *philosophia*, was clearly, in some sense, being done effectively by scientists.

Philosophers looked for some sense in which reality could be gotten right for which they were especially equipped. Many candidates have emerged, and produced great works. Philosophers supply the metaphysical foundations for science and everything else. Philosophers discover the epistemological foundations of all scientific knowledge. Philosophers clarify logical relations among concepts. Philosophers do conceptual rather than physical analysis. Philosophy is therapy for people obsessed with philosophy. And so on. Each of these special projects has had a vogue, sometimes more than once.

Some philosophers (Heidegger and Carnap, for instance) held that they had finally uncovered the true mission of philosophy, what real philosophy is. I doubt it.

4) What about philosophical progress? How much better is the philosophy of today than the philosophy of the mid-seventeenth century? What improvement in non-question-beggingly “getting it right” there has been seems almost entirely parasitic on the intervening progress of science and mathematics. All that is really wrong with Aristotle’s *De Anima* is an inadequate theory of the mechanisms of the brain. All that is wrong with his metaphysics is his wrong guess as to what would turn out to be the fundamental entities in explanations.

(The logical problems are still there. The sorites, for instance, was a well-known problem for the medium-sized object defender.)

We probably have gotten better, because there are a lot more of us, and we have a much larger population to recruit from. But those old guys were really good. Most genuinely philosophical historians of philosophy read their predecessors as contemporaries sadly misinformed about science.

(Just as Pollock’s admiration for Rembrandt doesn’t mean that Pollock will do Rembrandt-like work, so your admiration for Hume does not mean that you will try to do more Hume-like work. Things change, but it’s not progress, any more than art history is a tale of progress.)

III Is this insulting or what?

Some people (not you) would take it seriously amiss that I characterize philosophy as merely a fine art. Here are some remarks to remove some of this amissness:

1) Being an art does not mean that philosophy is not serious, or that philosophy does not try to get things right and sometimes succeed. Anyone who has ever worked at painting or drawing knows that these are very serious undertakings. However, doing a painting or a series of painting is not quite having a research program. (I've always felt awkward about describing my "research" at times: "I'm trying to determine whether there are medium-sized objects." "I think, my friend, that the answer is 'Yes'".)

2) A practice being a fine art does not mean that every practitioner is a fine artist. Even among painters who work hard, are well-trained, and take their work very seriously, much of the product is quite routine. Being routine, though, means being able to do decent work. Publishable work, if it were prose rather than painting.

Among painters who don't take their work seriously, are poorly trained, and so forth, most of the product is routine. There are very, very many more average painters than great ones.

3) A practice being a "fine art" does not mean that it is "fine" in an evaluative sense. Some fine arts leave many people cold, or could strike people as silly. My personal view of most operas is that baloney gets in the way of music. (Look at the alternately pompous and silly book for *The Magic Flute*.) A taste for philosophy is a taste. People can live without it. In fact, one might suspect that really being into philosophy is pretty unusual indeed.

4) Some "traditions" and schools of painting (sets of background texts) may be less fruitful than others. Some genres may be limiting. It may be that no specialist in cameos ever does anything as great as a merely pretty good Dutch interior painter. So, philosophy being a fine art does not mean that all kinds of philosophy are equally good. (Note that routine painting is called "academic." Almost all philosophers are academics. Should we be worried about this?)

5) Painters and philosophers seek to get things right. What is this "getting things right?" Just as different painters can get things right even though their paintings look very different, so too philosophers can get things right even though they are saying different things. Take portraiture. Suppose that, per impossibile, Rembrandt and Picasso both paint portraits of Gertrude Stein. Is there a way of adding up the information in both portraits to get the a better picture of Stein? This seems just as silly as the idea of adding up "White Mythology" and "What Metaphors Mean." (This is not to say that someone could not write another piece on metaphor strongly influenced by both Davidson and Derrida.) I don't want to choose between Derrida and Davidson or between Foucault and Hacking.

IV Philosophy as Literary Art

Here is an anecdote I have published elsewhere: In the eighties, I gave Derrida a copy of *Naming and Necessity*, since we had been having conversations about analytic and continental philosophy, and I thought this would be a great way for Derrida to see what was terrific about analytic philosophy. Derrida said that he had already read the book, and that he couldn't make sense of it. What to make of such incomprehension? Of course, someone who did not recognize that Derrida is quite a good philosopher would have a ready explanation.

Another, much more plausible explanation would look at the conditions for appreciation of Kripke's lectures. To see why Kripke's work is great, you have to know Russell, the theory of descriptions, the current respected views about necessity, and so on. Briefly, you have to be familiar with the analytic texts of the twentieth century. For Derrida, having been trained in the aura of a different set of background texts, the issues were either not important, or were not being presented in a way that would make their importance clear.

In literary theory, this is called "intertextuality." Sophisticated literary works presuppose exposure to other texts. Exposure to other texts produces knowledge of topoi, genres, and other features with which literary artists work. How will you identify a gentle and skillful takeoff? Unless rhymes are usually phonologically exact, there is nothing striking about rhyming "core" with "car." How many of you can tell a good haiku from a routine one? How much of Renaissance poetry will you miss if you think "Phyllis" is an arbitrary name?

Philosophy is specifically conceptual art. How is it different from fantasy or science fiction? Part of the interest of philosophy may be something like "verisimilitude" or "lifelikeness" that is applied to novels. What exactly is it that makes characters seem life-like?

What makes some conceptual artistry "realistic" or interesting and other constructions not? I can think of two factors:

First, the project has to be hard. In every art, constraints are important. The artistry is to succeed within those constraints. So, particular verse-forms, the fugue, and the critique make it possible to do something pretty good. The harder the project, the better the accomplishment.

A new but simple discovery or a new puzzle is hard because anyone else could have thought of it but did not. Tastes differ here. Some people love paradoxes, other people think they are silly.

Second, it really helps if the "opponent" is quite a good philosopher. I'm reminded of chess-appreciation. A really beautiful chess game consists of two very good players neither of whom makes any obvious mistakes and one of whom wins "brilliantly." Pretend chess games are of little interest, no matter how beautiful the game would have been if it had only happened.

Some of the time, there is a repertoire of issues and options that has grown up in the field. If a view has achieved wide currency, a refutation of that view, showing that it is incompatible with other current views, is interesting.

V Does Analytic Philosophy have a future?

Really good contemporary philosophers (take it from me) often worry about how they will stack up next to Kant and Leibniz in a few hundred years. A better concern is

whether there will be anything recognizable as philosophy in a few hundred years. The practices of the academic culture have been working against the existence of a “field” for quite a while. Career success depends on lots of publications; lots of publications require specialization; specialization, for normal humans, requires near total ignorance of much of what passes for philosophy. We have already gotten to the point where near-total ignorance of Hegel and Hegel is acceptable. Very soon, people will never have read Rawls or Kripke, but only the works in their “specialty.” Any grand synthesizing will be out of the question, except among those who did not get tenure, who will have little influence.