

eugenio



Art against Philosophy



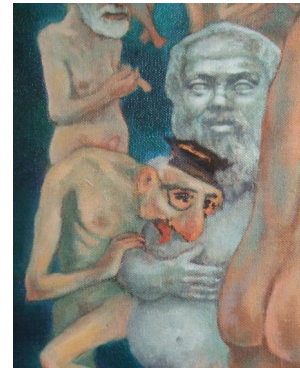
Art against Philosophy

In which I demonstrate by analogy the insufficiency of science, the fatuity of philosophy and the pre-eminence of art in describing reality.

The oracle at Delphi was sometimes a mischievous creature. Take the case of poor Socrates, he could be seen any day of the week accosting fellow citizens and disabusing them of their cherished beliefs. He did this because he came to believe, with an almost religious fervor, that what the oracle at Delphi had said of him was true; that he was the wisest of men.

He was wise because he had such a profound understanding of his own ignorance. But he had an equally profound understanding of everyone else's ignorance and he so annoyed the citizens of Athens that they condemned him to death. It was Plato who was the main instigator of this image of Socrates, and if it is true, one can sympathize with the Athenians.

Yet it may well have been the case, that when the oracle spoke no one was wiser than Socrates. But when he began to harangue the citizens at the marketplace, perhaps there was no one more foolish. And because he believed in the oracle, no one could best him in an argument, not even his wife. Nor could anyone persuade him to flee in order to save his life. And so with Delphic irony, it became impossible for this great philosopher to lose an argument, and so he died for wisdom.



W.V.O. Quine & Socrates

Despite this, Socrates was not propagating wisdom as such, but a kind of skepticism, ‘a questioned life’, more specifically a seeking of essences and definitions; a *‘dialectic’* that in the hands of men of lesser genius would have catastrophic consequences.

The French mathematician Rene Descartes in the 17th century initiated the modern trend for skepticism by persuading himself that he could trust in nothing except his own thinking self.



David Hume

But it was the Scottish arch skeptic David Hume in the 18th century who scored a spectacular own goal when he showed that not only was there no proof of the outside world existing, but that even ideas of the self are illusory. He effectively thought himself out of existence. Although, from his portrait one can see that he remained a corpulent fellow (perhaps he ate his dinners out of habit), because he appeared to live for some years after he demonstrated that he was no longer an empirical fact.

Yet in popular imagination today (that is among journalists), the consensus is that the world bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment philosophers is to be negotiated by science. Sub-atomic physics and astro-physics have confounded everyday thinking about the nature of reality. Neuro-physiology would appear to be investigating consciousness itself. At present it can be seen colour-coding electrochemical reactions in the brain (as though pointing to a man’s head might explain the metaphysical).

Not since the laws of gravity were fixed by Newton in the 17th century has there been a feeling that scientists, now working in collaboration, are on the verge of (in their own words) 'a theory of everything' where we will find out 'the mind of God' and whether He does or does not 'play dice'.



A Sociologist Advises

But of course, these words are euphemisms not for God but for a mechanistic view of nature. The 'Natural Philosophers of the enlightenment, the empiricists, the skeptics and encyclopedists had no use for God in their speculations.

Yet modern physicists are some way from knowing the basis of matter, let alone a broader concept of reality. At CERN, on the Swiss-French border they are colliding particles at 'almost the speed of light', and are excitedly confirming a 'Higgs Boson' particle, which might only then give them a 'standard model', a mathematical expression for a description of matter.

The Greeks of course are responsible for the semi-religious idea that truth is ultimately a mathematical concept. A forgivable error, propagated again by Plato, that because all things appear to have momentum, the only truth that can be found is in an idealized static world where mathematics is king.

But what is this 'standard model' that will lead to 'a theory of everything'? It is nothing less than an equation that proposes to describe all the rules of all the interactions of all the particles in the universe.

Yet even physicists agree that this 'model' that is currently being proposed cannot marry the fundamental force in space, with what is going on in the sub atomic particle world. In other words, bizarrely, it cannot account for gravity. Considering the centrality of gravity in any description of the physical world, this 'model' would appear to be premature.



Will and Lust



Dialectical Demon

CERN is not the first time that the (to some extent elected) kings of Europe parted with cash in the cause of alchemy, but it does show that science is going through a kind of millennial fantasy as in medieval times. This cavernous machine at CERN is humankind's greatest love letter to matter and is a fitting antithesis to the gothic cathedrals above ground, of another era, pointing in the other direction. Costing billions of euros, it awaits some patent office clerk to doodle a new equation that will turn it into a museum.

Astro-physics on the other hand has offered up space without end, an apparent infinity that mathematics can only hope to mark as symbol, but that diminishes even the imagination. The report from science about the place and nature of matter is not only speculative but also deeply uncertain.

That this should be so is curious. There is a strange poise in the nature of our understanding of reality that has not changed since the Greeks started playing with reason over 2500 years ago:

*the wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes...*

(the words of a wandering Jew at the start of the 1st millennium who upended the Greco Roman world).



Amore

From the time of Euclid (the relation within diagrams) to Newton (the relation between bodies in space) to Einstein (the relation between bodies in space and time) and to contemporary physics (the relationship of sub-atomic bodies in 'space time'), science has been about a description of things.

When science asserts a 'truth', it is in the form of an equation, which by definition equates different things. Science does not pretend to know a 'thing', other than in this relative sense. A thing in itself is what the philosophers used to call an 'essence'.

A recent popular theory for the emergence of the universe is that at a 'big bang' event not only matter but space and time also emerged into being. Reality is like a balloon where there is no 'outside'. Space, matter and time are things that expand or contract with and in us.

It is a pretty conceit that neatly sidesteps questions like 'before' or 'after' or 'infinity' or 'nothing'. Like nature offended by a vacuum, 'nothing' abhors physicists ('there is no such thing as empty space' – Hawking).

Scientific propaganda claims that it is finding (or has found) the basic building blocks of matter (currently 12 bits). At present it is playing with components of matter so small that they could better be described as events that appear in two places at once, or suspiciously exist only if the scientist is present. (Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle).

Furthermore certain sub atomic particles appear to have no history in the sense of having being in one particular place in time, rather they appear to have been everywhere with all possible histories. Richard Feynman's quirky diagrams describing all the possible combinations of sub atomic particles helped inspire the idea of multiple universes. Did the visual nature of his work influence such ideas? (Feynman himself was an artist of sorts and is fondly remembered as a bongo player).

Mathematicians pride themselves on the 'elegance' of their equations but they have already come up against a brick wall in the number 299,792,458 which is the speed of light in meters per second. That such a fundamental number should be so ungainly tells us a lot about the nature of physics.

'Mathematics has come to be the whole of philosophy for modern thinkers, and they profess to explain all other things by mathematics' said the founder of physics, Aristotle.

Popular sentiment has confused the genius of science (tinkering and making things, from steam engines to micro chips, from manipulating genes to developing non-stick frying pans) with knowledge. That is, it has confused engineering and knowing. Functionality is not knowledge; it is only knowledge of functionality. Science does not have the grammar to consider either the nature of knowledge or of reality. This used to be the realm of philosophy.

Science is like a great floating vessel, where the crew takes ever more precise measurements of the ship itself in order to find their bearings. Such measurements will give a sense of place but will in the end prove inadequate.



Freudian Family

Mathematics may be moving towards another overriding equation, but the idea that it will be a final 'theory of everything' before the journey has hardly begun is profoundly preposterous.

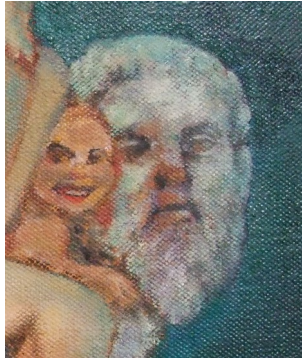
It is easy to be fooled into thinking that scientific knowledge is advancing at a frenetic pace, but genuine knowledge, with regard to matter, space and time, is still crude, tentative and often fanciful. It is beset by physicists on one side pontificating schoolboy mysticism and on the other side by pop scientists pretending to be philosophers impishly proselytizing atheism.

Now if physicists were metaphysicists they would see that (scientific atheism being oxymoronic) any fashion for an atheism based on 'science', has the same status as the belief that lightning is caused by Zeus throwing thunderbolts.

It follows that the opinions of the scientist with a philosophical bent are of even less value than the everyday prejudices of the man next door. Because the man next door at least has the advantage of not being under the illusion that his profession offers him some special insight.

Unless of course you are unlucky enough to be living next door to a philosopher.

Philosophers are that motley rump, left after the 'Natural Philosophers' of the Enlightenment began to specialize; scientists to laboratories initiating industrial and technological revolutions, while philosophers retreated to the cramped conditions of university life.



Although such conditions tend to prove successful breeding grounds. In the United States, where philosophy is relatively new, there are several thousand accreted philosophers earning a living, adding footnotes to Plato and, if not thinking themselves, then teaching about people who thought about thinking.

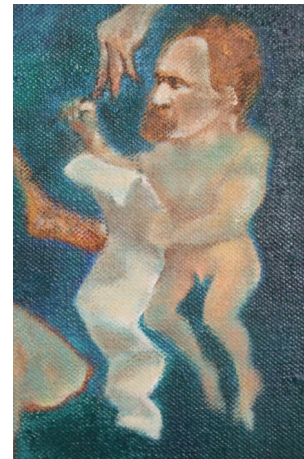
Plato

In Europe, over the last century, this hot housing of thought has produced a bedlam of ideas. Looking at it now, is like visiting those poor wretches incarcerated in 18th century madhouses where for a small fee one could spend an hour of morbid entertainment.

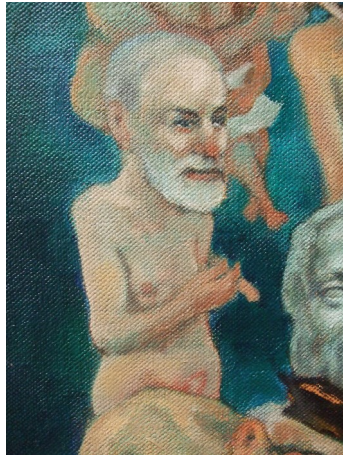
First of all there is the din of overcrowded intellectuals jostling for attention; the mad eyes the demented have that appear to see right into your soul; the preening of logical positivists; the chauvinism of existentialists; Marxists and dialectical materialists leering with social rage and genocidal menace; disturbed Freudians exposing themselves; logicians twisting on tautologies; the clamor of half-rationalists howling half-truths.

Attempted breakouts are merely herded into adjoining cells. Observe the crazed structuralists pointing at everything as though it had some mysterious portent. And who could not but be moved, to pity the wretched deconstructionists, masticating loudly thinking they are talking.

Of course prisons will always contain the innocent, and in a dismal hole alone, poor Nietzsche paces back and forth. He is still a favorite with the public but now he is quite mad. His is a tragic case of mistaken identity, he thought he was a philosopher but he was only an artist.



Friedrich Nietzsche



Mistaken self-identity is where the ego, confused by the super-ego or the id, unconsciously gravitates towards an oedipal rather than an electral complex (or vice-versa as the case may be). Who can deny that Sigmund Freud was one of the most imaginative minds of the 20th century; strangely he hated the idea that he should be considered a philosopher, though he is still often mistaken for a scientist.

Sigmund Freud

Understandably some of the inmates in this bedlam have retreated into their own worlds, inventing new disciplines with new words, but these disciplines are little more than gossip. But gossip inevitably seeps out and transforms itself into fact, and fact into faculty. And so, supplemented by charts and statistics, these disciplines can now be found aping academism in every modern university.

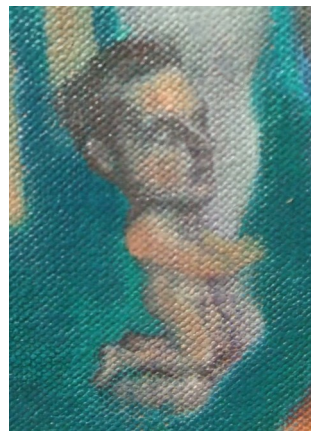


Derrida and Sartre

Philosophy is presently swallowed up by looking at consciousness as a sign system within language. In a Hume-like fantasy, consciousness and ultimately reality is nothing more than a function, or a byproduct, of language.

Any philosophy that looks into language and to sign structure in this way has no more chance of unearthing reality than a dentist has of finding the soul.

It is one of nature's most subtle rules that nothing can be shown to be preposterous while it is still in fashion. Making complicated word patterns (that is, contemporary philosophy) is especially subject to this condition.



Wittgenstein praying

Converting logical language to the purity of mathematical precision had been the holy grail for philosophers like Bertrand Russell. He thought he had achieved this in the early part of the last century but was usurped by his protégé Wittgenstein (the Van Gogh of philosophy), who also thought he had said the last word. But this pursuit has proved illusory and ends up in appropriately called 'language games' that are no more than therapy for academics.

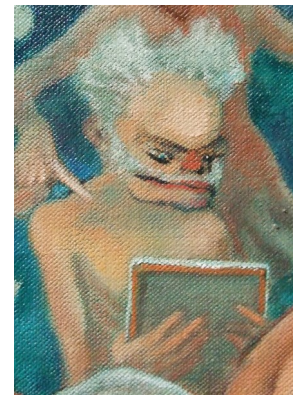
And academics are those who think other people's thoughts, happy parasites if you like, but they will never know what it means to enter the depths of creative life; they are like crows pecking at the sea.

Logic is condemned to attempting a verbal consistency that will always be incomplete, because words are not numbers. It is logical for the child in the womb to point to its umbilical cord and say 'this is proof that I am alone'. And who is there to argue?

The German G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) is said to be the last of the great system builders, whom even philosophers find impenetrable (this appears to be a badge of honour).

His central idea was that there is within history an all-moving interconnecting force; a 'dialectic' of antagonistic movements in philosophy, politics, history and culture itself. By way of 'thesis' and 'anti-thesis', this 'dialectic' moves humanity towards a final self-realisation called 'Absolute Idea', which is reality. Thus all of philosophy and history becomes complete. As luck would have it this fulfillment happens to be the philosophy of Hegel himself, which seems reasonable, for after all it was his idea.

His contemporary (and antithesis) Schopenhauer dismissed him a charlatan (which proves Hegel right in one way).



Schopenhauer Admiring Art



Marx and Dialectical Demon

But his concept of the 'dialectic' within history underpins the human catastrophe of communism. Under the banners of 'dialectical materialism' lay the greatest murder machines in history. This is a long way from poor Socrates and the 'dialectic' of discovering the virtuous and the true.

Now consider a work by Giorgione, 'The Tempest', 200 years before Hegel was born and now almost 200 hundred years after he is dead. It too was and is considered impenetrable. But its value is of another order. There is in this mix of oil and pigment the retelling of an eternal story that neither language nor logic can configure or confine.

One might ask why castigate modern philosophy considering the follies of art in its contemporary guise. Are artists also not part of the intellectual consensus?

But art that degenerates into philosophy, that is oxymoronicly called 'conceptual', merely shows that philosophy is inimical to art because self-consciousness is the enemy of creativity.

Clearly the manifestos (the aesthetics) produced over the last century by artists, are not really part of any philosophical debate. These manifestos, and indeed the inscrutable hysteria of shallowness that is 'performance' and 'installation' art, prove that contemporary artists have an overriding and legitimate excuse that absolves them from intellectual inquiry, namely stupidity.

(Eccomi qui condannato)



Voltaire and Emile du Chatelet

But it is our human fate to wonder about the nature of things. How can we know what is real? By some trick of nature, the world's two greatest philosophers existed in space and time within speaking distance of each other.

The Greek sense that all things were in motion so that the real could never be known, drove Plato to develop the poetic and influential idea that what we see is not real. Individual things like a table or a tree are shadows of the true table or tree that exist in an ideal way, in the realm of true and perfect things or 'ideas', knowable only through the mind and reason. This abstract idealism still permeates modern thought.

But his long time pupil Aristotle defined reality in an altogether different way. The world we live in is real. Matter exists and what we perceive in matter is the *form* that makes it what it is. He gave the analogy of a sculptor who takes matter (clay) and makes it into a statue (form).

The great Italian thinker Thomas Aquinas developed this idea. Matter and form together constitute things, but the form of a thing is much more than its dimensions, it is more like a guiding principle that is in a sense inside as well as outside. Looking at nature, from a stone to a plant to a man, we see an order of complexity. It is form that determines this reality and the higher the form the higher the reality.

If we could develop our sense of what form is, then knowledge of reality might open up for us. And it will not be found in calculation or speculation but in an intensity of consciousness. Art's play with form is at the center of this consciousness. That is why art holds a key to reality.

Aristotle said that the form of man was his soul.

Modern philosophy has lost contact with such an idea. But not yet art,
whose privilege it is to describe that soul.

Eugenio de L

Puglia, 2010

This essay was conceived as an afterthought to the painting. *Il Filosofo* (see back cover). All text images are from this painting which was abandoned in 2010.

Front cover is a detail from *The Apocalypse of St. Luke*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 ins. (122 x 122cm) 2001.

For religious and allegorical paintings by Eugenio see eoinde.com



*Eugene de Leastar, self-portrait
(detail). Oil on canvas. 2011*



Il Filosofo oil on canvas, 52 x 53 ins. (132 x 135 cm) 2010