

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Bust of Mortimer Adler at the entrance of
The Aspen Institute by Maude Hutchins

ART, THE ARTS AND THE GREAT IDEAS

Mortimer Adler

Why This Book

The title of this book—Art, the Arts, and the Great Ideas—calls for an explanation. Readers familiar with my writings about the great ideas may wonder what I am doing writing a book about art and the arts. How did I come to write it?

The explanation is, in part, autobiographical. When in 1982, I published *The Paideia Proposal*, I used language generally current in the educational establishment and in the catalogues of our colleges and universities. Doing that led me to speak of “books and other works of art” and also to use the phrase “literature and the fine arts,” which on the face of it implies that literature (epic, dramatic, lyrical poetry) and musical compositions are not works of fine art. The term “fine art” as used then could refer only to works of visual art that adorn institutions called museums of art.

In *The Paideia Proposal*, I outlined the ideal curriculum of basic schooling (kindergarten through twelfth grade) in a three-column diagram that is reproduced in the Appendix attached to this Prologue.

It set forth three kinds of teaching and learning (from left to right): the didactic teaching of subject-matter, the coaching of skills, and the Socratic conduct of seminars concerning ideas and issues and involving books to be read and other works of art to be studied for seminar discussions of them.

In the subsequent years in which we worked to promote the Paideia reform of liberal education at the level of basic schooling there was never a question about the inclusion in the curriculum of instruction in music and in the visual arts. But after many unsuccessful attempts to conduct seminars in which musical compositions and paintings or statues were treated like books as a way to get students to discuss basic ideas and issues, the Paideia Council, in 1990, came to two conclusions that radically changed the original and revised three-column diagram (see Appendix attached to this Prologue).

One was the negative conclusion that music, painting, and modeling did not belong in Column Three at all. They appeared to make no contribution to the discussion of basic ideas and issues. It seemed that books, and only books, served that purpose. This is not to say that music, painting, and modeling cannot be discussed in other terms, such as their aesthetic excellence or the excellence of their workmanship.

The other conclusion was positive. It held that the curricular inclusion of music and visual art belongs in Column Two, where students are coached in the skilled performance of these arts and also coached in listening to music and in viewing paintings, in the same way they are coached in the skills of the liberal arts, such as reading, writing, and speaking.

In 1990 at a meeting of the Paideia Council, I presented a paper entitled "Paideia and the Arts" that brought me to the writing of this book. Its central question is a difficult one. When musical compositions, paintings, ballets, and so on are not associated with words in any way, do they have anything at all to say about the great ideas? If so, what do they say? It is clear that they are to be enjoyed for their beauty or intrinsic excellence, but in addition, should they be discussed in terms of their relevance to the great ideas?

I am aware that most practitioners of the arts mentioned, as well as most of their critical exponents and members of the general public that enjoy them, will be interested in trying to answer these questions.

I am also aware that there is no point in trying to answer them until all the current confusions and ambiguities to be found in our use of words in speaking about art and the arts are removed. “Art” is one of the most misused words in the English language.

These confusions and ambiguities must first be clarified by knowledge of the relevant history of the terms as they were used from the Greeks until recent centuries. We will find that the prevailing confusions about the words employed and also their misuse have occurred very recently, mainly in the nineteenth century and the present day.

I am, therefore, asking readers to be patiently attentive to the opening chapters of this book where we shall be dealing with important points in the philosophy of art and in the philosophy of language. The general misuse of the term “idea” is another stumbling block that must be removed by reminding readers of certain basic insights in philosophical psychology. Only after these and other preparatory steps are taken can we come finally to clear answers to this book’s central questions, to the explanation of their meaning, and to the argument that supports the answers to which we are led.

The Current Prevalent Confusions

1

We are engaged in a philosophical discussion of art, the arts, and the great ideas. For the most part, philosophy has no technical vocabulary of its own, so it must use the words employed in everyday speech, but it must use them with a precision and clarity not found there.

All of the words we must use are generally misused or used with imprecision and with many equivocations. This applies not only to such words as “art,” but also to the word “ideas” and to such words as “meaning” or “significance.” It even becomes necessary to explain how we are using the word “great” when we refer to the great books and the great ideas. But the two most troublesome words are the words “art” itself and “arts,” for the latter calls for a classifica-

tion of the arts and a specification of what is meant when the word “literature” is used in connection with that classification.

The words I have called attention to were not always used in the way they are currently in popular speech and in academic discourse. Their usage in antiquity and the Middle Ages was remarkably different. Most of the changes that have occurred, which call for clarification, are of fairly recent origin. For example, the introduction of the phrase “fine arts” (or of their French and German equivalents, beaux arts and schone Kunst) is a distinctly modern innovation.

Before I attempt the clarification of all these troublesome words and phrases, and call attention to how these words were once used, I think it may be helpful to note some of the anomalies that occur in their current prevalent usage.

It is unreasonable to demand that people change the way they have been accustomed to using words. Even though I think there is a much better way of using the words in question, I have neither the hope nor a wish to persuade others to change the way in which they have become habituated in their use of words, or by fiat to abolish usages that have long been established by custom.

Nevertheless, I think it is both possible and reasonable to hope that some light will dawn upon those whose attention has been called to the confusions and misconceptions that are involved in current verbal usage. It may even be useful to make people aware that their use of words involves them in contradictions.

2

The word “art” is now generally used for the paintings that hang on the walls of institutions called museums of art or for the pieces of sculpture that stand on pedestals there. If that were the only or proper meaning of “art,” then those who compose pieces of music or perform musically for audiences in concert halls should not be called artists, nor should that name be applied to poets, novelists, dramatists, actors, choreographers, ballet dancers, architects, or other practitioners of the “arts.”

If the word “artist” is applied to human beings, should we not understand that artists are those men and women among us who possess this or that art? Is not the art they possess the power to produce this or that object, this or that performance? Is it, therefore, not reasonable to use the word “art” for the skill that makes a

human being an “artist,” and to use the phrase “work of art” (in French, *objet d’art*) for the product of an artist’s productive activity, which can also be called an artistic activity? But not without self-contradiction—if we continue to think that what adorns museums of art and makes the name of such institutions intelligible to us—is the misuse of the word “art” exclusively for paintings and statues.

Let us next consider the phrase “literature, music, and the fine arts.” Does it mean that literary and musical compositions are not works of art, or just that they are not works of fine art? How does the phrase “the arts” come to mean exclusively the visual arts, or even more narrowly visual works of art produced by painters and sculptors, objects hung on walls and stood on pedestals, objects bought and sold in art galleries?

What about the word “literature”? Is anything produced in letters or with words literature? Does literature include all books? That certainly is one usage of the word. Anyone doing academic research compiles a bibliography that he or she regards as the literature of the subject under investigation. But literature has another academic meaning. College catalogues, in addition to listing departments of music and of fine arts (exclusively signifying the visual fine arts), describe English departments as those that give courses in English or in comparative literature. By this is meant only some of the books written in English or in other languages, not works of history, science, philosophy, and theology, only books of so-called imaginative literature—books that contain epic, dramatic, or lyric poetry; novels, short stories, and plays.

The confusion is further confounded by the current usage attached to the word “idea” in connection with the reading and study of books and of other works of art. Here the word “other” means paintings and musical compositions.

I shall deal with that troublesome word “idea” later. It is used equivocally in many senses and needs clarification as much as does the word “arts.” Also to be treated later are the words “meaning” and “significance”.

The Relevant Clarifying History

1

Throughout the dialogues of Plato and the treatises of Aristotle, the word “art” is used as frequently as “science,” and more frequently

than the words “philosophy” and “history.” Science and art are for the Greeks the two fundamental forms of knowing—the former, knowing that, what, why, and wherefore; the latter, knowing how. Wherever we today, in popular speech, would say that a person possessed the know-how for getting something made or effected, they spoke of the art he possessed.

The Greeks never used the word “art” in an honorific sense or as a term of praise to characterize a work that has a high degree of excellence. They did not make the distinction that we do between arts and crafts, reserving the latter term for the skill of the artisan or workman, and using the word “art” only for skills of production and performance regarded as having great worth or dignity.

However, as we shall see presently, the Greeks did distinguish between the liberal and the servile arts, and thought of the former as higher and the latter as lower. The practice of the servile arts was for the most part found in the work of slaves and artisans, whereas the liberal arts were to be found only among free men.

To list all the things that are deemed to be arts in the writings of Plato and Aristotle would be a very extensive inventory. A brief sampling of that list would contain the art of the cobbler, the builder, the shipwright, the pilot, the helmsman, the general, the equestrian, the grammarian, the rhetorician, the sophist, the physician, the carpenter, the fisherman, the hunter, the poet, the flute-player, the surveyor, and so on.

2

The list of things that the Greeks called science, such as physics, mathematics, and metaphysics or theology, would constitute a much shorter inventory, though they recognized that certain arts, such as medicine, were based on a substantial amount of scientific knowledge for which they did not have a separate name, such as biology. For them, the word “medicine” named both an art and a science, and in this we still follow them. For the Greeks, the cultural innovation that occurred with the introduction of art rather than the coming to be of science separated them from other ancient peoples. Homer, in distinguishing the Greeks from the barbarians, refers to the former as the “horse-taming Achaeans.”

For our present purposes, the crucial texts are in the works of Aristotle, especially in the *Ethics* and the *Poetics*. In Book VI of the *Ethics*, dealing with the intellectual virtues, Aristotle names five, dividing them into two groups, the three that are concerned with

knowing for the sake of knowing (usually called the speculative virtues) and the two concerned with knowing for the sake of action (usually called the practical virtues).

The speculative intellectual virtues are nous (understanding or insight), episteme (the kind of knowledge that is called in Latin scientia), and sophia (speculative wisdom, sometimes called philosophical wisdom).

The two practical intellectual virtues are differentiated by the two spheres of action—praxis, or doing, moral or political conduct, on the one hand; and poiesis, or making something, producing, or performing, on the other. In the sphere of praxis, the intellectual virtue is phronesis (prudence or practical wisdom); in the sphere of poiesis, the intellectual virtue is techne (art, technique, skill, or know—how).

3

Within the sphere of poiesis (making or performing), two distinctions are introduced, one by Plato, the other by Aristotle. When in the dialogues, Plato deals with the art of the farmer, the healer, or the teacher, he differentiates between these three arts and all the other arts. He points out that in these three arts, the artist cooperates with nature to produce an effect that the powers inherent in nature are able to make without the help or intervention of a human artist.

The fruits and grains of the field grow naturally; the farmer merely helps them to develop with greater regularity by working with the natural processes of growth. So, too, the body heals itself without the help of a physician, and the mind acquires knowledge without the help of the teacher. That is why Socrates, when asked about his method of teaching, replies by saying that he cooperates with nature as the midwife cooperates with nature when she helps the mother to get through the pangs and pains of giving birth to offspring.

All the other arts, according to Plato, are operative rather than cooperative. They operate on natural materials, transforming them to produce the man-made things or artifacts that would not come into existence at all without the intervention of artists. This is not true of foodstuffs, health, and knowledge. These are not artificial or man-made effects, though man's cooperative art may be of service in their coming to be. Aquinas later makes much of this distinction

between the three cooperative arts and all the other arts, especially in his treatise on teaching.

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In all these instances of either cooperative or productive art, artists work with physical materials. The teacher, as contrasted with the farmer and the physician, is a liberal artist because, in Aristotle's view, the teacher works with the intellect, which is for him or her an immaterial faculty. So, too, the arts of the grammarian, the rhetorician, the logician, or dialectician, the art of the poet and of the musician are liberal because, according to Aristotle, the artist works with symbols rather than with physical materials.

We may be tempted to dismiss this distinction as one whose significance is entirely conditioned and colored by the fact that Aristotle lived in a society based on the institution of chattel slavery. That would be a mistake, for the distinction has great significance quite apart from that institution and in our consideration of the arts today.

The difference between the arts that produce their work in symbols rather than by transforming physical materials has ontological, not social, significance. It signifies the mode of being or existence of the work of art, not the social status of the person who produced it. A work of art that consists of transformed matter can exist only at one place or locality in the cosmos. It has a unique or singular physical existence. If, by chance or intention, it is destroyed, it no longer exists anywhere.

In sharp contrast, consider a story told in words, a composition written out in musical notations, a logical argument, a mathematical demonstration, a rhetorical appeal, all symbolically expressed. These works of art do not have any singular locality whatsoever.

There were many different storytellers at many different places who passed on Homer's Iliad and Odyssey from generation to generation. Many of the writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides have been physically destroyed, but their extant writings can be read anywhere on earth. They exist in as many minds as there are readers whose intellectual imaginations are fed by the verbal symbols used by the dramatists in the writing of their tragedies.

What has just been said about told stories or written ones holds true for all the other arts that use symbols rather than physical matter to produce or make something. The maker of flutes and the flute-player are servile artists, the one making a metallic instrument that exists at a singular place, the other performing on that instrument at one or another particular time; but the composer of music for the flute, who writes its musical notations, is a liberal artist because that score can be reproduced indefinitely, can exist at any time and place, and can be heard imaginatively, by the inner, not outer ear, by anyone who can read music.

Were it not for the fact that the arts of which Plato writes in the Republic, where he deals with the education of the guardians, became famous in the Middle Ages as the seven liberal arts (the arts of the trivium and the quadrivium), we could avoid using the words "liberal" and "servile." The latter word is so repugnant to

contemporary ears that we find it more comfortable to state this ancient division of the arts in other terms.

4

The significant differentiation is between the material and the immaterial, or between (a) the arts whose products must be sensibly apprehended at a given time and place and (b) the arts whose products can be apprehended anywhere on earth and at any time because they are apprehended by the intellectual imagination.

For our present purposes, we need not consider here the many points that Aristotle makes in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics* about the relationship between art and nature, between the causal process in natural change, especially generation, and the causal process in the production of artificial or man-made effects. But we must spend a moment more on certain basic points in Aristotle's *Poetics* in which he treats the art of poetry.

Though the Greek word *poiesis* signifies any making or producing, the derivative English word "poetry" signifies only one kind of making—making in the special set of symbols that constitute the language of everyday speech. The musician and the mathematician use the symbols of very special languages. We shall subsequently consider whether there is also a special set of symbols, a special language, used by the painter and the sculptor, but in advance we already know that that language is quite different from the language of music and poetry.

The *Poetics* deals with epic and dramatic narrative. It has little to say about songs or lyrics. It is not at all concerned with the distinction between prose and verse. A historical narrative can be written in verse, and a poetical narrative can be written in prose, as in modern times novels and plays are for the most part.

For our present purposes, we must pay attention to Aristotle's theory of art as imitative of nature and to his distinction between poetical and historical narratives. Poetical narratives, epics or dramas, novels or plays have a special object of imitation, which is human action, not action at a moment, but action in the course of time. Poetic storytelling presents to our imagination something that resembles the human actions with which we are directly acquainted through experience, or that we have learned about by reading historical or biographical narratives. We will consider later whether musical compositions and pictorial paintings have human actions as their object of imitation.

What, in Aristotle's view, is the essential difference between poetical and historical narratives? He tells us in one well-known passage that poetical narratives are more philosophical or more scientific than historical ones. The latter deal only with singularities. The truths known by science and philosophy are universal. The truths recorded in written histories are all particular or singular. In what sense does poetry stand on a middle ground between the singularities of history, on the one hand, and the generalities, or universals, of science and philosophy on the other?

Aristotle's answer to this question is in terms of the distinction he makes between poetical and logical truths. The singular truths of history and the universal truths of science and philosophy are all truths about actualities. That truth consists, he tells us in the fourth book of *Metaphysics*, in the conformity of the statements asserted by historians, scientists, and philosophers with an independent reality that exists. Logical truth is defined as the correspondence between the judgments made by the mind and the facts that exist outside the mind and are independent of it.

In contrast, poetical narratives have a quite different kind of truth, one that is based not on actual realities but on the realm of possibilities. If the story that a novel or play tells us about human actions has the ring of possibility or probability—if, in short, it has verisimilitude—it has, in Aristotle's view, poetical truth.


A poetically true story is a likely story. Many of the stories told in histories that are true are often much less likely than the stories the poets tell us. Though some of the events or happenings recorded in history are often highly improbable (but never impossible), works of history can be true about what actually did happen.

The distinction between (a) the kind of truth that is in poetry, or the truth of other artistically contrived narratives (if musical compositions and pictorial paintings have narrative content) and (b) the logical truth to be found in history, science, and philosophy is of the greatest importance. It is concerned with the problem of the crucial difference between (a) books (historical, scientific, and philosophical) as material to be discussed by the Socratic method of questioning and (b) poetical narratives and such narrative content as can be found in musical compositions and in pictorial paintings.

The point that makes the distinction between poetical and logical (or factual) truth so important is simply this. Logical truth is exclu-

sionary. If a statement is logically true, any statement that is incompatible or inconsistent with it must be factually false. Poetical truth is not exclusionary. A narrative that has poetical truth does not exclude other narratives, which tell quite different stories, from also being poetically true.

The realm of the possible is hospitable to a wide variety of different, even contrary, possibilities. All these differing possibilities are compossible—things that can coexist. The realm of the actual is the realm of the impossible—things that cannot coexist.

One example of compossibility, or of the nonexclusionary character of differing poetical truths, may help to make this point clear. Among the Greek tragedies, there were three stories about Electra, Orestes, Clytemnestra, and Agamemnon—one by Aeschylus, one by Sophocles, and one by Euripides. Among the Greek tragedies, most of which have been lost, there probably were many Antigone stories, many Oedipus stories, many Medea stories, and so on. One of these does not replace all the others as being the one true story, requiring us to reject the others as false; whereas in science one hypothesis replaces all competing hypotheses when one is found by experiment to be true and all the others are, therefore, excluded by it. 

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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