Art, Science, and the Meaning of Life: an Inquiry into Art in a "Scientistic" Culture

By
Addison Phillips

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Supervisor: Associate Professor David Weberman

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that the dominance of scientific understanding in Western culture or "scientism" is problematic for both epistemic and existential reasons and that other forms of understanding must therefore be regarded with equal legitimacy. I argue both that there are phenomena in human life that the methods of science preclude the possibility of coming to a scientific understanding of and that scientific understanding has the negative feature of reductively explaining phenomena in a way which strips them of their meaning for human life. Further, I make the case that some art is able to convey understanding about the world and that artistic understanding remedies both of the problems which arise when the world is understood strictly scientifically or "scientistically." I stand in opposition to most of the history of philosophy with my perspective on art. However, I offer no new theory of art but contend that art does a variety of things and serves a variety of functions – one among them being the conveying of understanding – and that the search for a simple theory of art is therefore counter-productive.

Contents

I. Introduction

Wittgenstein believed that Western European culture was in a period of spiritual and intellectual decline; his thoughts on this topic were heavily influenced by Oswald Spengler.[1] Spengler puts forth the theory that living, organic cultures decline into dead, mechanical civilizations where the flourishing of the arts is replaced by total domination by mathematical and mechanical sciences. While I do not straightforwardly embrace such a theory of decline, it does seem to me that there is something right in Wittgenstein's and Spengler's evaluation of contemporary culture in both Western Europe and the United States. I believe Wittgenstein points toward a problematic epistemic prejudice which only gives legitimacy to scientific understanding and exerts a significant influence on the general population and academics alike. I have experienced such a prejudice in many of my friends, peers, professors, and acquaintances. Indeed, a main source of Wittgenstein's pessimism toward the developments in Western European culture was his problem with the fact that science had become the pervasive, indeed, the only acceptable form of understanding for a significant portion of the culture and that science had become an idol for many rather than one method or approach to understanding the world. Wittgenstein was opposed to what today is sometimes called "scientism."[2] It is with this scientism or *the belief that scientific understanding is the only legitimate kind of understanding* that I take issue.

To elaborate, the position that I here oppose is the epistemic bias which regards all forms of non-scientific understanding as provisional, flawed, and approximations to scientific understanding. The scientism that I am challenging believes that any understanding which is not scientific is ultimately in need of some kind of scientific clarification or elaboration and that any

[1] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932).
[2] James C. Klagge, *Wittgenstein in Exile* (London: MIT Press, 2011), 83.

phenomena which cannot be accounted for in terms of science must be regarded as epiphenomenal or projections of the human mind. Further, the scientistic mind gives no consideration to what form of understanding is most appropriate to getting at the nature of a particular phenomenon but always assumes that a scientific understanding is what is needed. I hold that science does offer an extremely valuable and important way of looking at the world, but that its success in the practical realm has led to the problematic widespread assumption that it is only science which bears any weight with regard to understanding ourselves and our world. I argue that there is more than one legitimate way to obtain an understanding of the world and that science is simply one among these various ways. This thesis is concerned in particular with one of these other legitimate forms of understanding: artistic understanding.

Wittgenstein writes, "People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians etc. to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them* - that does not occur to them."[3] In this thesis I will argue that the conceptions of art as mere entertainment or as only conveying emotion or beauty or as only expressing subjectivity are all unacceptably narrow and inappropriate ways of understanding the role of art in human life. Further, I will maintain that the arts have been treated unfairly in the history of philosophy and that there is a valuable kind of understanding that the arts can provide about the world, if they are taken seriously. I aim to provide a philosophical analysis of art which overcomes these historical prejudices. Through description of a variety of aspects of human life and experiences of art it will be seen that, like prose and ordinary speech, art *can* convey and engage with a huge variety of different areas of human life and offer the art appreciator valuable insights and a kind of understanding that cannot be found elsewhere e.g., when one understands that what a poem

[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 36e.

expresses can only be expressed by *these* particular words in *this* particular order.[4] The ultimate aim of my explorations in this thesis is to show that the various art forms not only can offer legitimate modes of understanding the world, but that the understanding that is conveyed or disclosed by the arts is an understanding which science, in principle, cannot provide, and that this kind of understanding is a necessary condition for living a meaningful life - the relation of artistic understanding to meaning in human life will be handled in the final chapter. Richard Shusterman writes that each age must "struggle anew to determine and affirm both art's nature and its value."[5] This thesis is a defense of art in a scientistic age.

However, I hold that the subject of art and aesthetics is immense and diverse and that it has largely been misunderstood by philosophers due to a preference for generality and theory-making over faithfulness to the subject-matter itself. And this preference for generality has science as one of its sources.[6] I must clarify that I am not arguing that all art provides an understanding of the world, but only that some art does this and that the appreciation of this fact is important for meaning in human life. (Without an alternative form of understanding like artistic understanding of e.g., love, one is left with only a scientific understanding, an understanding which reduces this all-important and life-governing phenomenon to mere chemical reactions or an evolutionary advantage). Art, I argue, does a variety of things and serves a variety of functions. In what follows I will advance no theory of art, but will attempt to free it from the clutches of detrimental generalizations. If this thesis brings it about that its readers begin to look at and understand individual pieces of art as they present themselves rather

[4] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 152e.
[5] Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 139.
[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 18.

than see them through a lens which dictates that art *must* do or be some one narrow or individual thing, then I will feel I have succeeded.

In Part 1 I will do necessary preliminary work which will prepare the ground for my argument for the fact that some art can provide understanding about the world. Chapter II will argue that the general dominance of scientific understanding in our culture is problematic both because of the epistemic fact that its methodology precludes the possibility of providing an understanding of certain phenomena and the more existential fact that it strips phenomena of their meaning for human life. Chapter III highlights further areas of human life which science fails to engage with in order to provide the reader with a vision of the possible areas in which art might offer helpful understanding and motivate the idea that there is something for art to offer an understanding of at all. Part 2 deals more specifically with art. Chapter IV offers explicit argumentation for the fact that some art conveys understanding, while Chapter V provides a series of examples of experiences of art which demonstrate that some art does convey understanding but that it also serves a variety of other functions. Finally, Chapter VI discusses how and why artistic understanding is necessary for meaning in human life and concluding remarks are made.

Part 1

II. The Problem of the Hegemony of Scientific Understanding

It may not be clear to some initially why the hegemony of scientific understanding is a problem. After all, science has drastically improved the material quality of life of so many, significantly increased average life expectancy, made travel and communication millions of times faster in some cases, and etc. Indeed, it is difficult to enumerate all of the benefits that humanity has reaped from the fruits of scientific investigation and scientific forms of

understanding. Why then is the hegemony of scientific understanding a problem? If humanity has profited so greatly from understanding the world scientifically, why not encourage science to envelope and dominate all corners of the human intellect? One could of course cite the practical drawbacks to scientific understanding that science-based technology has produced e.g., industrialized warfare, accelerated deforestation, excessive pollution, climate change, etc. However, this type of critique does not go far because most appear to believe that the benefits of science and technology outweigh the negative side-effects and drawbacks. Further, many seem to believe that it is science which holds the key to alleviating the problems caused by science and technology e.g., the solution to problems with pollution is better, cleaner technology which requires more in-depth and complex scientific understanding.

On what grounds then can one take issue with the hegemony of scientific understanding? In what follows I will show that there are at least two primary and interrelated reasons for why one should take issue with the hegemony of scientific understanding. The first reason is that scientific understanding has the feature, whether necessary or historical and contingent, of reductively explaining phenomena in such a way that their meaning or significance for human life is stripped away. For example, science understands e.g., happiness in terms of biochemical reactions and evolutionary advantage, both of which lead one to see this phenomena not for what it is in human life, but for what it is within a particular conceptual framework which is absolutely unlike human life. The second reason is the simple epistemic observation that scientific understanding seems to miss things; its method excludes from its enquiries phenomena or aspects of phenomena which appear to be of obvious relevance and significance. I will consider the thoughts of several philosophers who pinpoint in their works areas of human experience which science is unable to engage with.

Wittgenstein, in his typically concise and penetrating fashion, offers one of the best short summaries of the first reason to take issue with the hegemony of scientific understanding, the reductive explanatory characteristic of scientific understanding. He writes,

> As though lightning were more commonplace or less astounding today than 2000 years ago.
>
> Man has to awaken to wonder - and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again.[7]

It's clear what Wittgenstein has in mind here. He's referring to the fact that the modern mind views events like lightning as fully explained by natural law and therefore unimpressive. All are familiar with the characteristic utterances related to these cases; they always involve the word "just." For example, "Lightning is *just* an electrical discharge generated by differently charged regions of clouds." And this is at times all the consideration that is given to an event so awe-inspiring as lightning and all the consideration that is ever given if one only views lightning from the perspective of scientific understanding. As mentioned above, I am uncertain whether this reductive and "sleep-inducing" characteristic of scientific understanding is intrinsic to the scientific method and a scientific perspective on the world or if it is merely a coincidence that scientific knowledge flourished during a time Western culture became less impressed with or more pessimistic toward natural phenomena. I do, however, believe that it is quite plausible and defensible to hold that these two aspects of Western culture, science and jadedness, are causally connected. A variety of arguments might be offered in support of this position. For example, Heidegger takes issue with a technological and scientific understanding of the world because it leads one to see everything in terms of how it can be used or to see everything as one sees a

[7] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 5e.

tool.[8] One might argue that the scientific understanding of lightning strips wonder and meaning from the human experience of lightning because we recognize that the power of lightning is the same power which produces coffee every morning in the kitchen. Humans tend to not wonder or see deep meaning in that which they are able to control and manipulate for their own purposes. One does not, for example, wonder at a shovel in the midst of digging; the shovel must virtually disappear and become a functional part of the body in order to be used effectively.

Whether or not the above or other similar arguments are ultimately convincing about the fact that scientific understanding is inherently reductive and meaning-reducing does not matter for my present purposes. I tend to find the above argument and ones like it convincing, but the aims of this thesis do not rely on the truth of the conclusions of the above argument. The aims of this thesis do not rely on the above argument because, as a matter of fact, scientific understanding does have a reductive explanatory effect in our culture. I recently read of a conversation that a philosopher had with a high school biology teacher. The high school teacher shared her glee with the philosopher over having finally convinced her class that love is nothing more than neurons firing in the brain.[9] While there may be more personal reasons for this particular high school teacher's beliefs, it is still the case that she represents only one of countless examples from my own experience and from the experience of many I know of individuals insisting on a reductive scientific explanation or understanding of a phenomenon. For example, one of my close friends cannot help but see such phenomena as love from a reductive scientific perspective - she feels it intellectually dishonest to do otherwise. While some of these cases are possibly the result of individual psychologies, there are many instances

[8] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
[9] Ronald L. Hall, "It's a Wonderful Life: Reflections on Wittgenstein's Last Words," *Philosophical Investigations* 33 (2010): 297.

where the motivation for an individual holding this kind of view appears very much to be a desire for truth and for clarity (like my friend). Because of this reductive effect that scientific understanding has on phenomena in human life, it is necessary to establish and uphold the legitimacy of other forms of understanding. The reason, however, to uphold the legitimacy of other forms of understanding for the purpose of avoiding the reduction of meaning caused by scientific understanding is not merely that it is nice to understand phenomena in a meaningful way, but that scientific understanding fails to do justice to many of the these phenomena it aims to account for. If science says that that love is nothing but neurons firing in the brain (or some such other reduction) then we must respond that this mode of understanding is incapable of providing any insights into what a human means when they speak of love.

One might argue in opposition that the kind of meaning in phenomena that I am referring to is nothing more than a subjective projection of the human mind and has no real ontological status. While such an objection fails to actually engage with what has been said thus far and simply presupposes the kind of scientistic perspective I here oppose, I shall say a few words in reply. Take again the phenomenon of love. It is experienced neither in the world like an object nor merely as a mental state. It dwells outside of this distinction. The experience of love contains no subject-object distinction; it is more basic than such a construction. Further, love is a phenomenon in *human life* and human life is not an affair in which a subject basically interacts with objects. Dewey says it like this, "Experience, in short, is not a combination of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but is a single continuous interaction of a great diversity..."[10] The accusation that the meaning of phenomena like love for human life is nothing more than a subjective projection is therefore unwarranted because the framework from which the objection is made is inappropriate for dealing with this kind of phenomenon.

[10] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Los Angeles: Indo-European Publishing, 2012), 115.

The second reason for taking issue with the hegemony of scientific understanding is that there are phenomena or areas of human life which the methods of science seem to exclude in principle from its investigations. First, consider the following passage from Nietzsche,

> But an essentially mechanistic world would be an essentially meaningless world! Suppose one judged the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, and expressed in formulas - how absurd such a 'scientific' evaluation of music would be! What would one have comprehended, understood, recognized? Nothing, really nothing of what is 'music' in it![11]

Nietzsche begins with the point that was just argued for in the previous paragraphs; that a mathematical or mechanistic understanding of a phenomenon has a reductive effect on the meaning of that phenomenon for human life - the phenomenon is rendered effectively meaningless. He continues by asserting that an understanding of music is in principle impossible to obtain within the framework of the mathematical sciences. He seems to be right. Even if one were somehow capable of exhaustively representing in mathematical formulas even the simplest of tunes, it still stands that to read and understand this formula is not to understand anything of music at all. An understanding of a mathematical formula and an understanding of a piece of music are absolutely unlike each other. One must then conclude that such a mathematical representation tells a person nothing about what music is and that music as such is therefore excluded in principle from being understood by the mathematical sciences.

Aside from mathematical formulas, one could attempt to explain or understand music as nothing more than the variation of pitch, tempo, etc., which has such and such an effect on x, y, and z part of the brain and so on. There is an obvious parallel here with the case about love mentioned above. But again, to understand music only in terms of variations of pitch, tempo, etc. is to understand nothing at all of what one means when they speak of music.

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[11] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 239.

Henri Bergson makes some insightful and fascinating observations about motion that are relevant for the present discussion.[12] Bergson observes that there are two elements which constitute motion: space and progress or movement through that space. He states that space is a homogeneous medium, but that the motion through this space eludes space because of the qualities of motion. Space can be sliced into infinitely thin pieces and individual points of space can be isolated and these divisions remain spatial because space is static and identical at every point. Motion, however, is not divisible in this way because it does not share the static and homogeneous qualities of space. Attempting to pinpoint a particular instant of motion is, to borrow some images from William James, like trying to examine a snowflake in one's bare hand or quickly turning on the light to see how the darkness looks.[13] The moment the snowflake is caught, it melts and is a snowflake no longer and the moment the light is flicked on to allow one to see, the darkness vanishes. So too, when one pinpoints a single instant of motion one negates motion. Motion is necessarily heterogeneous and dynamic and to try to capture a single instant of motion is to strip it of both of these qualities. An instant of "motion" loses its heterogeneity because an instant of motion can only be captured in spatial terms and space is a homogeneous medium. Similarly, it loses its dynamic quality because an instant is necessarily frozen and static. Nothing of motion remains in the instant of "motion."

Bergson's observations about the nature of motion are relevant here because, on his view, the mathematical sciences are unable to give an account of motion. In order for mathematical science to plot the change of position of objects in space, it must divide the change into discrete points along a trajectory. In so doing, motion as such is lost. The mathematical sciences must render motion as a series of static homogenous points along a line or curve and so all that makes

[12]Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, trans. Melissa McMahon, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 65.
[13] William James, *Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 244.

motion, motion is removed from the account. The dynamic and heterogeneous aspects of the change in position are untranslatable into mathematics and therefore motion is untranslatable into mathematics.

Motion is a pervasive characteristic of human life. Indeed, motion is one of the surest signs of life; only the dead lie static and still. The motion of the chest rising and falling with inhalation and exhalation, the motion a loved one's heart felt during an embrace, the motion of a partner's searching eyes, each of these examples of motion are unsatisfactorily accounted for when understood as change in discrete spatial position. Motion as such is irreducible to the terms in which mathematical science necessarily deals. If one desires to understand and to gain deeper insights into motion, one cannot look to science. A different form of understanding is necessary for the one who desires to understand motion.

The last thinker that will be considered regarding the areas of human life which science fails to engage with is William James. I include only these three examples at this point because I believe the problem with the hegemony of scientific understanding is sufficiently demonstrated with them and it would be redundant to continue in this train. However, other areas of human life which are similarly unable to be accounted for by science will later be considered. These other phenomena as well as the ones already discussed will also be considered in connection with areas of human life in which artistic understanding might prove fruitful.

It is appropriate to conclude this discussion with William James because his insights on the nature of human life and experience encapsulate all that has been said thus far about what science does not deal with and it gestures toward all that will be said about what art is able to

engage with. James frequently emphasizes the "thickness"[14] of reality and I believe his most eloquent, colorful, and compelling expression of this vision is the following,

> Philosophy lives in words, but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation. There is in the living act of perception always something that glimmers and twinkles and will not be caught, and for which reflection comes too late. No one knows this as well as the philosopher. He must fire his volley of new vocables out of his conceptual shotgun, for his profession condemns him to this industry, but he secretly knows the hollowness and irrelevancy.[15]

James specifically mentions philosophy here, but the general vision that is expressed has significant import for the present discussion. James appeals to an experience had by many of us, the experience or appreciation of the fact that our concepts do not penetrate through the thickness of things down to their essence but merely circumscribe their outer edge. James is not making a distinction here like Kant's between noumena and phenomena. Rather, James refers to the inability of our words and concepts to do justice to the "living act of perception." James is pointing to the ineffable in ordinary experience. He says that there is something which "glimmers and twinkles" and perpetually eludes capture and I take him to be referring to precisely those dimensions of experience which inspire the artistic or poetic in humans. An example of an experience from my own past which contains this uncapturable, glimmering, and twinkling feature (which may be ultimately misleading in more ways than one, but should serve as a good starting place for those who do not identify with James' quote) is watching the sun rise from behind a mountain in southern Washington, USA while standing on another mountain peak as rivers of morning fog slid through the valleys and ravines. This example may be misleading because 1. this experience literally glimmered and 2. it is an unusual experience and I think James has much more ordinary experiences in mind. However, if one can first appreciate how

[14] See William James, "A Pluralistic Universe", *William James: 1902-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 745.
[15] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2002), 353.

poorly our concepts do justice to such an experience one may more easily be able to see how our concepts don't do justice to even the most ordinary of experiences. Another example from my own past which is likely more faithful to what James has in mind is sitting on the back deck of my house in West Virginia and silently watching the wind rustle the leaves of the trees. For those who know what I am referring to, such an experience is equally as impossible to exhaustively account for in language. Human life is thick with ineffable detail and, for those who see it, neither philosophical nor mathematical scientific understanding are able to engage with it. And, I hold, these are not merely extraneous or irrelevant details which are missed by science and language, but are essential to life and meaning as we know it. The absence of this thickness and these details would not amount to the loss of a luxury, but to the loss of humanity and life itself - *and to understand the world strictly scientifically is for these details to be absent in a real way*. To see the world strictly scientifically is to largely ignore this thickness, to see straight through this detail, to direct one's attention only at what has been formulated in terms of language or the mathematical sciences. For example, if when looking at tree branches I pay attention to no more than what the word "branch" picks out, I quite literally do not see the branches that are before me but only see the concept of branches or what is common to all branches. For, to truly see tree branches is to appreciate that no two are alike and that the word "branch" is no more than a tool, a bookmark. For those who desire an understanding of these essential dimensions of human life, science just will not do. One must look to other forms of understanding to gain the insight that they desire. The aim of this thesis is to explore such an alternative form of understanding - the understanding provided by the various art forms.

The work of this chapter has been preliminary. I have begun to clear out a space in which artistic understanding, which will be discussed later, can be beneficially employed. The

next chapter will complete the task of making a space in which artistic understanding might usefully operate. In what follows I will continue to highlight areas of life which scientific understanding is unable to engage with but my aim will be to set out a way of seeing human life which is in great need of forms of understanding other than that offered by science. In other words, the next chapter will look much like the latter half of the current one with the difference being that I consider the work of the next chapter to be positive rather than negative. While the next chapter will reinforce what has been argued for in this chapter, my primary goal will not be to demonstrate the problems with the hegemony of scientific understanding, but to highlight potential areas where an artistic form of understanding might be fruitfully applied.

III. Some Characteristics of Human Life

In this chapter I aim at putting forth a vision of human life which is in need of forms of understanding other than that provided by science. The approach of this chapter is descriptive; I will describe human life in such a way that shows it is shot through with characteristics which require a form of understanding other than that offered by science in order to appreciate them. I aim to convince the reader in this chapter, but not with a traditional argument. My goal is to convince the reader with examples and descriptions which lead him to see things in a different way. The specific characteristics of human life that I will explore are its temporality, non-systematic order, rhythms, and continuity and culmination. I contend that none of the aforementioned characteristics can be accounted for by science and that all of them are good candidates for the kind of phenomena which art can serve to provide a deeper understanding of. Further, I hold that all of the just-mentioned characteristics are a necessary part of living a meaningful human life. A strictly scientific perspective on the world leaves out all of the above-mentioned characteristics; a different form of understanding then, is a necessary condition for

understanding one's own life as being meaningful. I will examine the characteristics of human life in the order that I have just listed them.

One might find the following discussion a bit haphazard and unsystematic - and that is precisely the point. My aim here is simply to point to various dimensions of human life in order to show the reader that it is not possible to systematize human life as such. Human life cannot be systematized and I believe the only way to show this is to depict life, to the extent of my ability, as it is - an unsystematic and sometimes random reality. The nature of this investigation compels me to "travel criss-cross in every direction over a wide field of thought."[16]

Human life is a temporal affair. Its span, its pace, and all of the events which compose it are all temporal. It is therefore of great importance to understand the temporal nature of one's own life. Where can one go to obtain such an understanding? Henri Bergson insists that science, physics in particular, cannot provide an understanding because the real meat and substance of physics, mathematics, deals only in instantaneities and does not deal with time as such, or what he calls duration. - And it is physics which is the branch of science which one would expect to reveal the nature of time, so if it can be shown that physics cannot reveal the nature of time then it must be that no branch of science can do this. - Physics can deal with time only to the extent that instants of time can be counted. The unit of measure is of no significance. Physics may choose to count time in seconds, picoseconds, or nanoseconds, the only relevance for the current discussion is that physics must *count* time. Bergson observes that counting involves ignoring individual differences.[17] Individual characteristics of objects are ignored in the process of counting; only that which is common is relevant so that all the objects can be grouped into one set in which all share a necessary collection of common features. But, Bergson

[16] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3e.
[17] Bergson, 49.

contends, there must be some difference between each member of a set that has been counted otherwise all the members would merge into one unit. To attempt to count without any differences at all would result in only ever dealing with a single object, e.g. one sheep. An image of a single sheep would appear before the mind in successive moments and the process of counting would never go beyond one. The process of counting requires that the objects previously counted be retained and the only way for them to be retained is to be retained in some spatial representation. Counting requires that which is counted to be lined up in a spatial configuration. To count instants of time then is to spatialize time or to not deal with time at all.

Time is pure transition, or flow, or passage.[18] Time is change without object or state. Time as such cannot be counted. Counting spatializes time by making it static and homogeneous and therefore not time at all. Because time as such cannot be counted, physics cannot give us any understanding of time as such or the temporal characteristic of human life. Of course, physics is able to do extremely useful and helpful things by counting instants of "time", but it is crucial to remember that this pragmatic approach fails to engage with what time is in itself.

A characteristic of human life which, it seems to me, is increasingly being forgotten in our ever-more technoscientific world is that life is ordered, but not systematically so. Science teaches that the world is governed by simple natural laws that are expressible in mathematical formulae. Our increasingly technological life-world displays an environment to our minds and senses which is governed by mechanical and electronic systems that are designed by engineers who exploit human knowledge of these natural laws. Almost all consumer products are mass produced so as to eliminate variation to the greatest extent possible. However, if we step away from our technology and consumer goods and set our knowledge of natural law aside, we witness a world which is neither chaotic nor systematically ordered, but, and here it is difficult to find an

[18] Bergson, 205.

appropriate word, non-mechanically or non-systematically regulated. The seasons change with regularity but they e.g., do not change at the same time and in the same manner each year. Yet they do always change. No two seeds are identical, no two trees are identical, yet every acorn, if given water, time, and proper soil will grow into an oak tree. No two snowflakes are alike, but water will always freeze at zero degrees Celsius. All people have the same basic physical structure, but no two look the same. The examples are endless. Because of the fact that it is science which leads us to forget about the non-systematically regulated characteristic of human life, it is clear that it cannot be of any help in coming to understand human life as such. One must look elsewhere for an understanding of this.

Dewey heavily emphasizes the importance of meaningful rhythms in human life and their inability to be understood scientifically. One might read Dewey's discussion of rhythm as an identification and elucidation of one dimension of the non-systematic regularity in human life. He writes,

> And this rhythm in what is experienced is something quite different from intellectual recognition that there is rhythm in the external thing: as different as is the perceptual enjoyment of glowing harmonious colors from the mathematical equations that define them for a scientific inquirer.[19]

No scientific understanding of rhythm aids an individual in understanding rhythm as such. Dewey's assertion is analogous to the thought experiment about the color-blind neuroscientist which seeks to demonstrate the importance of qualia. Something is missed in a scientific understanding of rhythm. Some examples of rhythms in human life include the rhythm of birth and death, the rhythm of the seasons, the rhythm throughout the day of varying human body temperature, the rhythm of day and night, the rhythm of hunger and satiety, and the list goes on and on. What is missed here by science is not only an understanding of rhythm as such, but an

[19] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 152.

understanding of the meanings of these rhythms for human life. There is more to understand about the rhythm of e.g., birth and death than the biology of reproduction, the physiological features of aging, and the process of organic decomposition. The meaning of these events overflows the story that science tells about them. A substantive understanding of the rhythm of life and death should e.g., teach a seriously sick and aged man when is the right time to die or teach grieving children when is the appropriate time to agree to remove their comatose parent from life-support or show a young couple when is the right time to begin to have children. Science only offers an understanding of the physical processes which underlie these kind of events. What is needed is a form of understanding that can distill or present or organize the rhythms of life in a way which deepens our understanding or appreciation of them. And I argue that artist understanding is one of the forms of understanding that is able to do this.

Looking again to Dewey, the last characteristic of human life that I here want to examine is his unique understanding of experience or of what it means or takes to have *an* experience.[20] Dewey argues that having *an* experience is to experience a part of life as coming to a consummation rather than an end and that this consummation causes one to experience this *experience* as a whole. The consummatory event binds all the events together which compose the experience in a way which gives it continuity and self-sufficiency. The examples he provides include having a meal, conducting a conversation, writing a book, etc. but I think his best attempt at pinpointing the phenomenon he is referring to is by citing the phrase, "that *was* an experience."[21] The kind of experience Dewey is referring to is the kind which, on recollecting it we utter, "that *was* an experience." A better or more vivid example than the ones just listed might be that of traveling to a different country for the first time for a week where the customs

[20] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 35.
[21] Ibid.

and practices are very different from one's own. On reflection, one would almost certainly feel that they had had *an* experience in Dewey's sense. However one feels about the breadth of application of Dewey's conception of experience, it is undeniable that he pinpoints an important phenomenon in human life with his description of experience. The general import of Dewey's observation for the present discussion is that human life, or at least parts of it, have the quality of continuity and culmination. Certain periods of our lives or even our lives as a whole hang together in a way which is difficult to capture in words. Similarly, we feel a certain completion, culmination, or, using Dewey's term, consummation in certain events in life which overflows e.g., the fact that one gets a degree which marks the completion of one's college *experience*. For Dewey, only art can deal with these features of life. Art is the only intelligent human production that has the properties of continuity and culmination and as such it is only artistic understanding which can offer insights into the features of continuity and culmination in human life and the meaning of these features for human life. Science, by contrast, gives an account of e.g., human life which ends in cessation rather than consummation. An individual is born, they live, they die, and they are no more. Within a scientific framework, an individual's life comes to an end and there is no more to the story. But death has more meaning than this in human life and we therefore will not come to understand it or other consummatory events through what science has to teach.

To reiterate, the work of this chapter has been to show that human life is in need of forms of understanding other than that offered by science. My aim here was to make broad brushstrokes in order convey a vision of life as a whole that is in need of an alternative form of understanding like artistic understanding. This work has been necessary because many today, due to the influence of science and technology, do not see anything in life anything which

escapes the framework of understanding offered by science or, better, which escapes scientific understanding in principle no matter how much it advances. Indeed, it is not uncommon for scientifically-minded people to believe that those phenomena which do not fit within the framework of scientific understanding are illusory. I have shown in this chapter that there are many essential and pervasive aspects of human life which are unable to be understood by science and that other forms of understanding are therefore necessary. In what follows I will argue that art can fruitfully serve as one of these alternative forms of understanding.

Part 2

IV. Artistic Understanding or the Noetic Quality of Art

In the preceding two chapters my goal was to show the limitations of scientific understanding and the potential place for artistic understanding. The purpose of this chapter is to show that much art is not only for mere pleasure, entertainment, or diversion but that some art is a source of understanding about the world. Where the previous two chapters have shown that there is something for art to help us to understand if art provides understanding, this chapter argues that some art does provide an understanding of the world. In this chapter I will argue against theories of art which reduce it to imitation or mimesis, the expression of emotions, the expression of subjectivity, etc. and argue for the importance of the noetic quality in the experience of some art. Indeed, I will argue against the idea that any theory of art is productive or appropriate.

I borrow the term "noetic quality" from James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. James lists noetic quality as one of four characteristic marks of religious experience. He describes noetic quality thus,

> Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.[22]

I utilize James' notion of noetic quality for the simple reason that his description of the noetic quality of mystical religious states seems to me to be a perfect description of the kind of quality which I here want to argue for the importance of in the experience of art. I argue that the experience of art is an understanding-imparting experience, though we have difficulty in saying precisely what the understanding is that we have gained. One might take issue with my use of "understanding" where James uses "knowledge", but it seems to me that he uses the term loosely. Indeed, the way in which he continues to elucidate the idea of noetic quality after using the term "knowledge" makes it seem like he means something nearer to understanding. For example, he uses the terms "insight" and "illumination." Whatever kind of intellectual content James has in mind, it does not seem to be a stretch to substitute the term "understanding" into his description. I feel additionally justified in this appropriation of a description of mystical religious experience due to the great overlap of religion and art throughout history. For example, anywhere that religious practices have sprung up, artistic practices came hand-in-hand. Anywhere religion is practiced there is painting or architecture or sculpture or dance or poetry or all of these. Further, Socrates compares artistic activity to religious activity in Plato's *Ion*[23] and countless such other comparisons and connections between art and religion have been made throughout history.[24] Indeed, I hold that all four of the characteristics of mystical religious

[22] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 295.
[23]Plato, "Ion", *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1997), 942.
[24] For example see Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 293.

experience listed by James apply to the experience of art and I will later utilize one more of these, ineffability.

In this chapter I will not attempt to offer my own definition of art to replace those which I see as faulty. Rather, following Morris Weitz's[25] Anti-Essentialism about art I hold that there is no one thing in virtue of which all things that are called art are called so. I argue that art is a family resemblance concept and that there is enormous variety among those things which we call art. Most relevant to this thesis is the idea that art does not communicate only one thing, but communicates a huge variety of things as well as performs other functions besides communication. Art can convey many of the things that have been ascribed to it historically and do much more. Art, like language, is not confined to "speaking" about one thing, but can "speak" about or convey a large variety of things as well as do things. - On this note, the idea that art is a language or that the arts are different languages will also be explored but ultimately rejected due to a vast array of conceptual issues. - Art can express emotion or convey a subjective state or impart understanding or even create new values and bring to light new aspects. That there is no one definition of art and that art can convey understanding will both be argued for, but the fact that art can convey a huge variety of things will be established in the next chapter where different examples of experiences of art will be examined.

Weitz argues against essentialism about art by employing Wittgenstein's observations about the concept "game."[26] Games are related to one another in an overlapping network of similarities and there is no one commonality in all things that we call games. Some games are played on boards, some on fields, some are played to win, some for amusement, some utilize cards, others utilize balls. "Game" is what Wittgenstein calls a family resemblance concept. As

[25] Morris Weitz, "The Role of theory in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956): 27-35.
[26] Weitz, 27.

there is no one feature common to all people in a family but two share the same nose and another pair have the same eyes, so too there is a variety of connections and similarities among those things we call games. There is a great variety of activities that fit into the concept of game, yet all who know the word "game" are able to apply it without any difficulties. There is nothing defective about a concept with no essence, such concepts work perfectly well in practice. One could only find a problem with such a concept if they judged it based on some prior philosophical prejudice. But Wittgenstein insists that one should not demand that there be an essence, but should look and *see* if there is one. One should examine a variety of games or, in this case, art and *see* that there is in fact no one thread running through all instances. Compare for example a poem by W. B. Yeats, a painting by Andy Warhol, and Adumu dance from the Maasai people in Kenya. Only someone with a particularly rigid conception of the workings of language would insist that there must be some one thing in common to these three examples.

Weitz argues further that it is in fact required for art to lack necessary and sufficient conditions and thereby remain an open concept in order for the concept of art to function the way we need it to[27]. If art had necessary and sufficient conditions and thereby was a closed concept it would preclude the development of new types of art. In other words, if art was a closed concept it would restrict creativity. I believe many would agree that to strip art of complete freedom of expression or complete freedom of creativity would be to make art no longer art. Art is viewed as the wellspring of creativity in human culture so to attempt to close off this creative potential would be destructive both to art as such and to human culture.

The fact that there is no one essence to art means that there is no one purpose that art serves and no one thing that art conveys. Throughout history a variety of single functions or essences have been proposed for art. Some of the most popular and influential of these have

[27] Weitz, 7.

been Plato's idea that art is essentially mimesis or imitation, the idea that the purpose of art is to provide an experience of beauty, the idea that art communicates emotion, and the idea that the purpose of art is to please, entertain, or provide an escape. I argue that art in fact serves all of these purposes and more. One can think of examples of art which support all of the above claims, or, more exactly, support a more limited version of these claims. Consider the examples of the portrait and the bust. Many, but arguably not all, portraits and busts serve to imitate that which they depict. Of course, most portraits and busts also have the function of glorifying or honoring whom they depict, but the important point is that Plato was not entirely wrong; some art does in fact imitate. Another example which supports a limited version of the claim that art conveys emotion can be taken from popular radio and dance music. Part of the purpose of hit songs from contemporary artists like Nikki Minaj, Katy Perry, or Justin Bieber appears to be conveying emotions like excitement and enthusiasm. More examples which demonstrate this variety of functions that art performs will be examined in the next chapter. As mentioned above, the more controversial claim that I aim to establish in this chapter is that one of the functions of art is to impart understanding. Art has historically been pushed out of the realm of providing insight or understanding by philosophy[28] and is today pushed from this realm by the complete domination of scientific understanding. I argue, against these historic and present day tendencies, that there is good reason to believe that some art, if taken seriously, does provide understanding about the world.

The first hurdle to overcome in establishing the ability of art to convey understanding is to offer a different perspective on the beauty, the emotional content, and the pleasure encountered in many experiences of art and which are so heavily emphasized today. I will first

[28] Christoph Menke, "The dialectic of aesthetics: The new strife between philosophy and art," in *Aesthetic Experience*, ed. Richard Shusterman and Adele Tomlin, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 67.

offer a different take on the experience of beauty which will overlap with and be reinforced by my subsequent treatment of emotion and pleasure.

I argue that the experience of beauty and/or experiences which we describe as beautiful are in fact states of understanding of a particular kind. I hold that we use "beauty" as a linguistic placeholder for an ineffable understanding that is gained in these experiences. We come to understand a variety of things in the experience of beauty but cannot put any of these states of understanding into words. Yet, as with linguistically expressible understanding, we are compelled to give expression to this understanding. We want to express our understanding both in order to clarify what we have understood as well as to experience the pleasure in sharing. Just as we want to explain a phenomena to a peer when it finally "clicks", just as we want to explain to a friend or peer the working of e.g., photosynthesis when we finally understand it, so too we are led to want to share or explain the understanding obtained in beautiful experiences. But here we run into a roadblock, we stammer, we stumble, we search for words, and nothing seems appropriate. But we frequently choose to express this kind of experience with the word "beauty" even though "beauty" always feels too general, too vague. Indeed, I take my own frustration at the generality and vagueness of calling all these different experiences merely "beautiful" as evidence for the fact that there is more content to this experience than mere beauty.[29]

With the characteristic of ineffability we again have an overlap with James' description of mystical religious states and I again find his description helpful. He writes that mystical religious experience

[29] It should be noted that I am not arguing that all of the understanding provided by art is completely ineffable – there are degrees here. I believe, for example, that it is generally easier to express the understanding one obtains from a novel than from a symphony. But, even in the case of the novel there is always a component of the understanding – an important one – which defies expression in ordinary speech and can only be expressed in the form of a novel.

> ...defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd.[30]

Though James never wrote anything which focused on art or aesthetic experience, I get the sense from these lines that he would agree with much of what is here being argued. In the same breath he writes of mystical religious experience and the experience of a symphony. He of course speaks of the *value* of a symphony rather than the understanding that it provides but his following remark about the non-musical person's attempt to interpret or understand the musician seems to betray a perspective on art which ascribes it something more intellectually substantive than value. James' remark that the non-musical person does not know how to interpret the musician implies that the musician's thoughts and actions are shaped by music. The thoughts and actions of an individual cannot be heavily influenced, especially to the point that someone else would regard them as absurd, by something which merely has value. In order for something of value to have an impact on an individual that thing must also have some kind of practical or intellectual dimension. Further, if we refer back to the definition James provides of noetic quality the case for James' belief in an intellectual content in music can be made even stronger. His definition of noetic quality includes the fact that "as a rule they [mystical experiences] carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time."[31] Whatever it is that the musician finds in music, it also has the characteristic of exerting authority on his thought and actions even after he has left the concert hall. So, it seems that mystical experience, which James ascribes noetic quality to, and the experience of music have the same practical consequence of influencing the

[30] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 295.
[31] Ibid.

thoughts and behavior of the mystic and musician respectively. I cannot conclude definitely that James believed the experience of art to have a noetic quality, but given his pragmatism it seems likely that he would have to assent to this.

The great diversity of cases that are described as beautiful, the discontent that myself and others feel with describing an experience of beauty as merely "beautiful," and the similarity in practical consequences between mystical religious states which James argues have a noetic quality and the experience of art all lead me to the conclusion that the word "beautiful" is used as a linguistic placeholder for a variety of understanding that is given by some art but which is essentially ineffable. When we have a genuine experience of beauty, I argue, we have come to understand something about the world, though we cannot say what it is.

Next, I offer a different perspective on the emotional content of the experience of art than what has been traditionally held. Rather than see emotion as the primary content of some experiences of art, I argue with James, and drawing on Plato and Aristotle, that there is an emotional quality to rational or scientific understanding and that therefore, now departing from James, the emotional content of some experiences of art gives one no reason to exclude understanding as one of its functions.[32] Further, I argue that certain emotional states make a person more receptive to certain kinds of understanding and that certain kinds of understanding evoke certain emotional states. A fence post can be installed by pounding it into the ground, thereby making a hole, or the hole for the fencepost can first be dug and then the fence post installed more easily.

James argues that the way a person knows they have achieved a more rational order of the world is by a feeling of a certain fluency of thought accompanied by a feeling of peace or

[32] See Dewey, *Art as Experience* 69.

ease.[33] The mark of rational understanding is a certain emotional quality. Again, James utilizes a comparison with music to illustrate his point. He writes, "Our pleasure at finding that a chaos of fact is at bottom the expression of a single underlying fact is like the relief of the musician at resolving a confused mass of sound into melodic or harmonic order."[34] He argues further that the person who is driven to seek a more rational picture of the world is a person who finds particularly intense delight in this "sentiment of rationality." One is drawn by his desire for this delight to seek a more rational picture of the world, another is drawn by a desire for a different delight to organize colors in a painting, still another is drawn by a desire for a yet different emotional pleasure to organize sounds in a symphony. All are driven to these various experiences by desire and the achievement of all of these states of order is accompanied by a particular affective quality. Both Aristotle's and Plato's discussion of wonder, the impetus to begin philosophizing, and its alleviation paint the same picture that James does.

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato's Socrates declares that it is a certain uncomfortable or disorienting affective state which drives the philosopher to begin philosophizing and that the resolution of philosophical problems replaces this uncomfortable affective state with a much more pleasant one. This affective state is wonder. In the Socratic dialogue, Theaetetus tells Socrates that philosophical puzzlements cause him to "wonder like mad"[35] and even feel "giddy" or dizzy. Socrates responds by telling him that what he experiences is wonder and that this is the *only* place where philosophy begins.[36] According to Socrates then, anyone who pictures the philosopher as someone who turns a cold, objective, wholly rational eye at the world and seeks truth for the sake of truth is wrong. The beginning of philosophy is an emotionally-charged

[33] William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," *Mind* 4 (1879) 317-346.
[34] James, "Sentiment of Rationality," 320.
[35] Plato, "Theaetetus", *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1997), 173.
[36] Ibid.

experience of disorientation something like the feeling many have had while hiking through a forest near nightfall and not being certain of which is the right path to take in order to reach home.

Regarding the state that one finds oneself in after having arrived at a satisfactory solution to a philosophical problem, Aristotle says that this achieved state is opposite and better than the one in which the philosopher began.[37] A philosopher begins in a state of feeling lost and uncomfortable and ends in a much more pleasant state in which he feels he knows his way about. In another place, Aristotle speaks of the desire associated with philosophizing and learning, "Learning things and wondering at things are also pleasant for the most part; wondering implies the desire of learning, so that the object of wonder is an object of desire..."[38] According to Aristotle, philosophy is intimately connected with and influenced by desire. After considering the perspective of philosophers ranging from Plato to James we may conclude that affective states, emotion, desire, pleasure, etc. initiate and drive philosophical inquiry. Further, and crucial to this discussion, it doesn't seem a stretch at all to say that all of the above discussion of the emotional quality of philosophy also applies to science. The scientist also begins in a feeling of uncomfortable disorientation and puzzlement and seeks a more pleasant state through alleviation of this puzzlement. Additionally, contemporary science is an outgrowth of philosophy and in some sense a fragmentation of it into highly focus specialties. It seems that one can easily conclude that the same psychological and affective forces govern both science and philosophy.

[37] Aristotle, Metaphysics Book 1 (A), *Complete Works (Aristotle)*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 5.
[38] Aristotle, Rhetoric: Book I, *Complete Works (Aristotle)*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 39.

If scientific understanding and philosophical understanding have an emotional quality, why is it that philosophical understanding and scientific understanding are not reduced to mere emotional states? The answer to this question is clear; it is because philosophical understanding can be explicated logically and linguistically and scientific understanding can be explicated logically, linguistically, and mathematically. One does not reduce scientific understanding to mere emotional states because the type of understanding that is achieved can be conceptually grasped and explained to others. The most prominent content of the experience is the understanding itself because one can, so to speak, wrap their fingers around it. Compare this with the fleeting emotional state which cannot be grasped or shared in much detail. One is further led to neglect to even notice the emotional content of scientific understanding because the understanding component is so useful and profitable. The emotional component of the experience of coming to understand e.g., the charge on a single electron, has little practical or lasting value for the scientist compared with the actual understanding of the charge on a single electron.

If art provides understanding about the world which is ineffable, as I argue it sometimes does, then it seems clear from the above discussion of the relationship between the emotional content and intellectual content of the experience of scientific understanding why many typically only recognize the emotional aspect of artistic understanding. The understanding provided by some art is neither conceptually explicable nor is it useful or profitable. One comes to understand something in an experience of art and the understanding is accompanied by a feeling of e.g., deep joy or profound sorrow, but one cannot clearly explain in words to oneself or anyone else what it is that one has come to understand. The only linguistically intelligible content of the experience is the e.g., deep joy. If asked what one experienced in e.g., a

symphony, the only way one can respond without uttering an inarticulate noise or a few disconnected thoughts is to report on the emotion that one experienced. Further, I argue throughout this thesis that the understanding that is provided by art is a necessary condition for having a meaningful life or understanding one's life as meaningful. Because the understanding provided by art relates to meaning in life and not immediate practical matters it is much easier to let this understanding walk away like one of the statues of Daedalus.[39] The understanding provided by science can be immediately grounded in practice and is therefore easily held on to. The understanding provided by art, however, is not easily put into practice and only has a lasting impact on a particular kind of person. I suggest that a certain temperament is required for a person to be able to hold on to artistic understanding. Certain emotions make one more susceptible to certain kinds of understanding and certain temperaments make one more prone to certain emotional states. A particularly happy individual, for example, will be prone to repeatedly encounter and therefore hold on to the types of understanding which happiness facilitates.

It is clear that the experience of art always or almost always has an emotional quality. But, as we have seen, this is no reason to theoretically exclude the providing of understanding as one of the functions of art. In both science and philosophy, there are experiences which have both emotional and intellectual components; there is therefore no reason to believe that the emotional dimension of the experience of art prevents it from also being an experience which discloses a certain understanding about the world.

I now turn to the next obstacles in establishing the noetic content of the experience of art. The next set of interrelated questions that present themselves are: What, if there are any, are the

[39]Plato, "Meno", *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1997), 895.

positive characteristics of the experience of art? - Thus far only the negative characteristic of ineffability has been discussed. - How is art able to convey understanding? Or, how does art refer to aspects of the world in a meaningful way? And, finally, how clear of an understanding of the world can art really offer? Each will be addressed in turn.

First, what is/are the positive characteristic(s) of artistic understanding? A great challenge presents itself here in answering this question precisely because of the one all-important negative quality of artistic understanding, ineffability. If the understanding supplied by art is ineffable, how can any linguistic categories apply to it? Despite this difficulty, I believe there is one substantive and positive characteristic that can be helpfully or at least heuristically applied to artistic understanding. It can be said that artistic understanding, or at least one variation of it, is a kind of understanding that consists in, to borrow a term from Wittgenstein, 'seeing connections.'[40] This 'seeing connections', Wittgenstein held, was the primary characteristic of his entire contribution to philosophy. The heart of this understanding which consists in 'seeing connections' is the pursuit of illuminating comparisons which reveals how things are.[41] Further, this understanding, Monk suggests, is the kind of understanding which results from an aspect change.[42] An important part of Wittgenstein's method consists in the use of illuminating comparisons that are intended to lead his readers to see phenomena under a new aspect. For example, his insistence in the *Philosophical Investigations* on the absolute unlikeness[43] of the different uses of language is helpfully illuminated by his comparison of the uses of language to the uses of tools in a toolbox.[44] It is somehow easier to see that the uses of language are absolutely unlike each other when one first sees that e.g., the uses of a hammer and

[40] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 54e.
[41] Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1990), 451.
[42] Ibid., 508.
[43] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 9e.
[44] Ibid., 9e.

a ruler are absolutely unlike each other, yet both are called tools and kept side-by-side in a toolbox. I argue that the kind of understanding or at least some of the understanding that is supplied by the arts is a kind of understanding which results in 'seeing connections' or seeing things under a new aspect due to illuminating comparisons.

Consider the most famous example of aspect-change that Wittgenstein utilizes: the duck-rabbit picture[45] . The duck-rabbit picture is drawn so that one can see it as either the head of a rabbit or the head of a duck. One might see the picture as only a duck or as only a rabbit or one might see it as a rabbit at one moment and a duck the next. An important parallel between artistic understanding and seeing aspects is that it is impossible to explain precisely to a person who does not see e.g., the rabbit, how to see the rabbit or how it is that you, who see the rabbit, see the rabbit. In this way, seeing an aspect has a certain ineffable quality. All that one can do is utilize illuminating comparisons. You who see the rabbit might say, "Think of these as ears." Or, "See this bit as the nose." Most of the time, these comparisons will cause the aspect to light-up to the person who previously could not see it. I argue that art is able, in its various mediums, to offer illuminating comparisons which cause aspects of the world to light up, or cause one to see parts of the world in new ways. One comes to a new understanding of something in the world because the comparisons and juxtapositions that only art can accomplish bring one to see connections that one never saw before. Wittgenstein offers a description of one kind of aspect called an 'organizational aspect' that I think here is useful. He writes, "One kind of aspect might be called 'organizational aspects'. When the aspect changes, parts of the picture belong together which before did not."[46] Some art brings parts of the world together which before were disparate or disconnected.

[45] Ibid., 204e.
[46] Ibid., 219e.

The important difference, however, between seeing the duck or the rabbit aspect of the duck-rabbit picture and seeing the new aspect or understanding that a piece of art offers is that because of the complexity of phenomena that art deals with and because its various mediums give it the ability to refer to and evoke parts of the world which language often cannot access, it is usually not possible to show the new aspect that one has gained from a piece of art to another person by pointing and saying things like, "Think of these as ears." as in the case of the duck-rabbit. Often, the only way to see the new aspect or understanding that a person gains from the experience of a piece of artwork is to allow the work of art to show the new aspect itself with its unique set of illuminating comparisons. Ultimately, I offer this characteristic of artistic understanding as tentative and limited. It is tentative because the ineffability of artistic understanding makes it impossible in the end to *say* anything definitive about it. It is limited because there are a huge variety of experiences of art and understandings that one can come to from the experience of art and there is therefore not only one type of understanding which is characteristic of them all.

Next, how is art able to convey understanding? Dewey suggests the arts are languages, that each art is a different kind of language with different expressive powers so that what is said in one art form e.g., poetry, cannot be said in another e.g., sculpture.[47] In fact, the idea that art is language or that it has deep and significant similarities with language is one of the most common views in art theory.[48] While I found this view compelling at first and still find many of the parallels between art and language interesting and even illuminating, I believe this comparison must ultimately be rejected due to massive conceptual difficulties. Conceptual difficulties arise because the comparison of art with language inexorably leads to the problematic application of

[47] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 106.
[48] Garry L. Hagberg, *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 31.

linguistic categories to art. And, as has been argued above, if art deals in the ineffable then the application of linguistic categories and concepts will always bring about a great deal of trouble. For example, when one considers art to be language it is natural to ask what it is that art says or what it is that an artist says with art - and here one immediately sets off on the wrong course. To inquire into what it is that art says presupposes that what it "says" can be linguistically formulated as an answer to this question and this, it has been argued, is not possible. Because of the inability to answer this question about what art says one must conclude that art in fact *says* nothing. And if art *says* nothing or if one can *say* nothing with art, how can it be language? Better possible candidates for expressing what art does when it conveys some kind of intellectual content are "disclose" or "reveal". Wittgenstein utilizes the term "disclose"[49] at one point to refer to the way that art engages with the world. Another difficulty which arises from the comparison of art and language is that art is mistakenly held to the same standards of clarity as language and, consequently, art is then considered to be a vague language, an inferior language of lesser clarity. The problem of the clarity of artistic understanding will be discussed shortly.

The last conceptual difficulty I will highlight deals with translation. Art simply cannot be translated into ordinary discourse. Dewey insists that it is stupidity to attempt to do so with poetry and the same applies to all the art forms.[50] Anything which is a "language" should, to a lesser or greater extent, be possible to translate into other languages. Many animals utilize complex arrangements of sounds in their interactions with one another, but we do not consider these animal sounds to be languages because it is impossible to make any sense out of them as language. The untranslatability of art is an indication of the fact that art just is not at all what we

[49] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 64e.
[50] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 165.

mean when we use the word "language." Art is not language. Art is art and language is language.

Last, how clear is the understanding offered by art? Many hold that if art provides any kind of understanding it provides a vague understanding. But are these accusations justified? Is the understanding provided by art in fact unclear? I argue, with Aristotle and Wittgenstein,[51] that clarity is relative to subject-matter. Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* with a disclaimer about the limits of the clarity of the work which result from the limits of possible clarity in the field of ethics. He writes,

> Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of; for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. [...] for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs.[52]

Not all aspects of the world have a crystalline logical or mathematical structure. Indeed, nothing about the way the world appears to humans would give us any inclination to believe this is the case. Trees do not grow in straight lines and stones are irregular in shape, etc. The demand for crystalline logical clarity in all forms of understanding is a result of the fantastic success of contemporary mathematical science and the resulting idolatry of the scientific method which wants to see it applied to every aspect of human existence. But if there are areas of the world and aspects of human life, like ethics, which do not admit of crystalline clarity then it is foolishness to insist that we have such an understanding of these areas. Indeed, the insistence on crystalline clarity will land the inquirer further from the truth rather than closer to it if the phenomenon they are inquiring into does not have this kind of crystalline structure. If one area

[51] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3e.
[52] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics: Book 1, *Complete Works (Aristotle)*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3.

of human life is incompatible with mathematical understanding then the use of such understanding to comprehend this area of life will result in obscurity and deep confusions. I argue that art can provide an understanding of areas of human life which is as clear as possible given the nature of these areas of life with which art engages. Art can provide, for example, a completely clear understanding of the meaning of death in human life. I think that anyone who does not have an unreasonable prejudice for science would agree that understanding death and the meaning of death for human life is not a matter for mathematicians. Equally, I think any who are open to what art has to offer them would agree that they have experienced a more lucid understanding of death in the experience of art than with any information provided by biology, physics, etc.

Further, and of great importance to the shape and scope of this thesis as well as the expectations of the reader is that art itself is an area of human life which does not admit of a mathematical scientific understanding. Rainer Maria Rilke insists that many areas of life are unspeakable and that art is the most unspeakable of them all.[53] Rilke realistically recognizes that art is itself an aspect of human life and as such is only capable of being understood in a way which suits its nature. I would therefore be foolish to even aim at a mathematical scientific understanding in this thesis. An appropriate inquiry into art is one which first looks and sees how art is and what kind of understanding might be appropriate to it. I have here attempted to give an analysis of certain aspects of the experience of art in human life which is as clear as I believe the subject-matter allows.

[53] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Random House Inc., 1984), 4.

V. The Varieties of Experience of Art

The work of the present chapter is to present descriptions of several experiences of art in order to show that some pieces of art convey understanding while other pieces of art perform a variety of other functions. I will deal with concrete instances of experiences of art and attempt to offer faithful summaries and descriptions which do not presuppose any metaphysical, theoretical, or other philosophical framework. Theoretical and philosophical prejudices have plagued the interpretation of the experience of art throughout the history of philosophy.[54] I argue that if one looks at the experience of art and *sees* what it contains rather than thinking about what art should or can contain based on pre-existing theoretical frameworks, it will be seen that art both conveys understanding (sometimes) and that it is not a simple phenomenon with a single essence or function.

First, consider the example of the television miniseries entitled "Holocaust" that aired in The Federal Republic of Germany in 1979.[55] The series dramatized the life of Dr. Josef Weiss in Germany during the time of the holocaust and caused a massive emotional outpouring from the German public when it was aired.[56] Despite the efforts of numerous historians and other intellectuals to help the German people work through the legacy of Nazism, Schoeps writes, "For many people in the Federal Republic, "Holocaust" was an emotional introduction, the first encounter with the almost incomprehensible horrors of the Nazi regime."[57] It was an American-produced television miniseries which was able to convey to the German public an understanding

[54] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 131.
[55] Wulf Kansteiner, "History of the Screen and the Book: The Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television and Historiography of the Federal Republic of Germany," SUNY Binghamton, http:/archive.org/stream/HistoryOfTheScreenAndTheBookTheReinventionOfTheHolocaustInThe/HoloTV_djvu.txt.
[56] Julius H. Schoeps, "The Emotional Impact of the Airing of "Holocaust," an American TV Miniseries, in the Federal Republic of Germany," (1979), Germany History in Documents and Images, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1155.
[57] Ibid.

of the holocaust that statistics and historical accounts could not succeed in conveying. The artistic depiction of the life of one Jewish man, through the medium of film, was able to communicate what so many German historians, politicians, and others could not communicate with their combined efforts. It was only through the medium of film that the German public was able to begin to come to an understanding of the horrors of Nazism. One might hazard various explanations of what this mini-series was able to communicate that historical accounts and statistics could not. One might argue that the miniseries communicated the emotion or the personal experience of those which endured Nazi evils or that its narrative form was able to communicate the reality of a human in the clutches of such oppression or that the film had the power to create empathy in its viewers or any combination of these things. However one attempts to explain the impact of "Holocaust" it seems clear that it was able to give the German people an understanding of something about the horrors of the holocaust that they were unable to find elsewhere. Here a piece of art brought about an understanding of something which all else had failed to bring about.

Next, consider the following description of the experience of music from Schopenhauer, "...when music suitable to any scene, action, event, or environment is played, it seems to disclose to us its most secret meaning, and appears to be the most accurate and distinct commentary on it."[58] Schopenhauer's understanding of music is pervasively and detrimentally influenced by his metaphysics, but I believe that if all of this philosophical baggage is abandoned the above quote serves as an excellent description of one kind of experience of music. I am certain, due to my own experience of music, that Schopenhauer derives this description from his actual experience of music but that his metaphysical commitments lead him to go on and falsify the experience

[58] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 78.

with an implausible interpretation (which I here omit). Indeed, I have had experiences of music which this quote perfectly describes. For example, my experience of listening to the song "Towers" by Bon Iver is precisely captured by Schopenhauer's words. When listening to this song, it seems to me to disclose something important about the nature of motion, the movement of living things, and the interconnectedness of the world. If one abandons pre-existing philosophical and metaphysical assumptions and takes such an experience of music for what it is, one must conclude that music reveals or discloses something about the world to the listener.

Wittgenstein offers what also appears to be a generalization of a description of the experience of art in his own life with the following: "The miracles of nature. We might say: art discloses the miracles of nature to us. It is based on the concept of the miracles of nature. (The blossom, just opening out. What is marvelous about it?) We say: "Look, how it's opening out!"".[59] One might glean the lesson from Wittgenstein's quote that some art expresses the miraculous or the wondrous or that the function of some art is to substantively engage with the miraculous in a way that ordinary language cannot. Many are familiar with the kind of experience that Wittgenstein provides as an illustration. Many have been struck at one point or another with a sense of wonder that a thing exists or that something simply is the way that it is. When one is struck by the simple fact of a flower's opening out one is left without anything substantive or satisfying to say. Botany offers no assistance with this experience. One is unable to do anything but point and state what it is that is happening - but this statement of fact is always unsatisfactory, it always misses something. One of the functions of art then is to substantively and intelligently express the fact of something existing or the fact of something simply being the way that it is. In other words, one feels that a piece of music or a poem

[59] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 56e.

discloses more about the opening of a flower than anything that can be said with ordinary speech.

The previous three examples have shown that some experiences of art seem to provide various kinds of understanding about the world and events therein. But, as I have argued, art does more than disclose understanding. Oscar Wilde highlights one such other function. He writes, "There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them."[60] Wilde's point is something like the idea that the fogs in London are seen as they are now seen because of the ability of art to lead us to see things in a new way or notice aspects of things which previously went unnoticed. More precisely, he is saying that the fogs in London were quite literally not there until art made them come to the attention of Londoners. Londoners, according to Wilde, looked straight through these fogs or tried to see straight through them as best as they could in order to go about their everyday business. It was not until art portrayed these fogs in a certain light that their charm, indeed their very existence, became apparent to Londoners. Wilde's description of the impact of art on Londoners shows that one of the functions of art is to enrich our experience and direct our attention in new ways and I take it that Wilde was led to this insight from similar occurrences in his own life. It seems likely that Wilde is generalizing a description from his own experience of art.

Examples like the ones listed thus far go on and on so, in the interest of space, I will conclude this chapter with one final example. William James writes,[61] "The world of aesthetics and ethics is an ideal world, a Utopia, a world which the outer relations persist in contradicting,

[60] Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 28.
[61] Richard Shusterman, "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (2011): 355.

but which we as stubbornly persist in striving to make actual."[62] James' statement functions as a description of one kind of experience of art. Some art has the ability to create imaginary ideal worlds or imaginary ideal scenarios toward which humans can strive. I have certainly had experiences of art which function in the way James describes. The example that comes most easily to mind is the experience I have had listening to the national anthem of the United States of America, "The Star-Spangled Banner." This song has the ability to evoke an ideal United States, it can create a sense of what the United States might be or could be in an ideal future. The song creates a sense for a United States of America which does not exist and will never exist, but is an ideal toward which the people of the United States can strive. I do not doubt that a similar experience is had by those of many countries around the world when they experience music, poetry, etc. which tells of the imaginary greatness of their homeland.

Art communicates understanding, creates ideals and values, offers new ways of looking at phenomena in everyday life, and much, much more. When one looks at the vast variety of experiences of art it becomes obvious that the attempt to define a single essence or pin down the one thing art does is senseless. Such a pursuit would only be engaged in by an individual with either a very narrow acquaintance with examples of art or a strong prejudice for mathematical or scientific understanding.

VI. The Meaning of Life and Concluding Remarks

I have asserted throughout this thesis that artistic understanding is a necessary condition for a meaningful life, but why is this so? How can artistic understanding help to make one's life meaningful or help to understand one's life as being meaningful? In the introduction I stated that this is a defense of art or a justification of art in a scientistic age. My defense of art is therefore

[62]William James, *Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1235.

relevant only in this era of history. This historical contextuality also applies to the assertion that artistic understanding is a necessary condition for a meaningful life or perceiving/understanding one's life as being meaningful. Artistic understanding is only a necessary condition for a meaningful life in a scientistic era. There are two related reasons why this is so. First, scientific understanding, as I have already discussed, strips the meaning from all areas of human life which typically supply the meaning in our lives. It is impossible for one to perceive or understand their own life as being meaningful when the phenomena which are supposed to give it meaning - hope, love, loss, joy, etc. - are rendered meaningless to the intellect. It is left to art then to provide an understanding of these phenomena that leaves intact their meaning for human life. Artistic understanding would not be necessary in e.g., a spiritual era, of human history. Various spiritual traditions understand these phenomena fundamental to meaning in human life in a way that leaves their meaning for life intact. In such an era artistic understanding would still be beneficial and provide important insights that only art can provide, but this form of understanding would not be a necessary condition for a meaningful life. Second, not only does artistic understanding not strip the meaning from phenomena which are foundational to meaning in human life but, because of engaging with these phenomena for what they are rather than reducing them to some supposedly simple constituent components which they are not, art is able to provide significant insights into these phenomena. Art intelligently engages aspects of human life that are passed over by science and organizes them in a meaningful way. For example, music intelligently engages with time as such by being a necessarily temporal phenomenon that is intentionally organized by a musician. Art, then, not only recognizes the reality of these important phenomena which science renders illusory, but also deepens our understanding of these phenomena and gives us insights into how to live our lives.

For example, film not only offers an understanding of the rhythms in human life as such by portraying such rhythms as rhythms, but can also provide specific and deepened insight into these rhythms which help us to think and act in life. Take the film "Away We Go" directed by Sam Mendes. The film tells a story of an ordinary American couple, Burt and Verona, in their early 30's who are soon expecting a child. During the film the couple struggle with coming to terms with the shape their lives have taken and visit half a dozen cities in order to find the place where they want to live when their child is born. Verona also seeks closure after losing both of her parents some years earlier. The film deals with birth, death, loss, and healing. It suggests that a couple can experience the happiness of having children even without first securing complete financial security. It also suggests that new life, the birth of a child, can be beneficial in coming to terms with the loss of a loved one, the death of a parent. Of course, this is only a rough summary and a gesture toward the insight and understanding conveyed by the film which I have argued is ineffable. But I think it is clear that the imaginative way that this film and others like it deal with the important rhythm of birth and death provides a meaningful and helpful perspective on this all-important characteristic of human life.

A formative event in my approach to philosophizing about art was my encounter with Dewey's *Art as Experience* and my impression that it was the most faithful-to-art account of art I had read. Like Dewey, I have here attempted to offer less of a traditional argument and more of a view of a small part of the vast and varied landscape which is the field of art. Analytic Philosophy has largely discarded Dewey's *Art as Experience,* calling it a disorganized hodgepodge of observations and speculations.[63] I imagine one could make similarly unfair claims about some parts of this thesis. However, who is to say that, against the insights of both Aristotle and Wittgenstein, that a faithful treatment of this subject matter does not necessitate

[63] Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 6.

this form? Should the form of inquiry not match that which is inquired into? Should the surface of an irregular shape be chiseled and sanded away so that it fits into a round hole? Sometimes it should, if, for example, a piece of wood is being carved into an axle. But if all wood was always and only used for making axles we would not know what a tree is. Because of the fact that art offers a form of understanding other than that offered by philosophy (at least Analytic Philosophy) and contemporary science, the way that art itself should be understood by philosophy and science must remain an open question. It certainly seems unlikely that it can be understood scientifically.

One might argue that my very endeavor to defend art philosophically is self-defeating or contains an implicit presupposition that art cannot defend itself or that it cannot stand on its own two feet and I would sympathize with this argument. Further, I've often found that those who do not recognize the important place of art for understanding our world cannot be swayed by argument - they either see that art does this or they do not. Life, not philosophical argumentation, must change their opinion. For these reasons I feel, with Wittgenstein, that "In art it is hard to say anything that is as good as: saying nothing."[64] However, the importance of artistic understanding and its relation to meaning in human life make me unable to remain silent about it.

[64] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 26e.

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