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Some Reflections on my Philosophies

Nelson Goodman

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I would like to express the kind of gratitude and the pleasure that I feel hearing all these nice things about me. To agree with these remarks would reveal a hopelessly overburdened ego; to disagree with them would be rude and ungrateful and, I hope, obviously wrong.

But I don't believe you can imagine what it's like now, after a long checkered career in philosophy during which I've probably aroused more opposition than anyone ought to have, right from the beginning, along with influencing some people who have taken my work seriously and worked hard on it, often without any expected reward and sometimes without my knowing about it. Now these people have come out of from behind bars. It is now respectable in some quarters to agree with some aspects of Anglo-Saxon philosophy which could not be considered in France for a long time, I'm afraid. After all, here I was talking about combining science and art, and this was obviously going to be the death of any proper understanding of art, these things being totally incomparable.

Nevertheless, some of you avoided these habitual attitudes and studied my *oeuvre*, doing lots of difficult and often, I'm afraid, unrewarding work. And it's a great satisfaction to see that all I have written and said has engendered a lot of further work on the part of many of you. I take it that this is the thing that should be celebrated today. It's very nice to be rewarded by all these honors and compliments but what really counts at this session is not anything that I am likely to contribute here — I'm not going to make any new contribution or anything of the sort — and I suppose the wise decision would be not to say anything. Nevertheless I thought about what I shall say about my philosophy at this special occasion.

There is no such thing as the philosophy of Nelson Goodman any more than there is such a thing as the finger of Nelson Goodman. There are many philosophies, but on the other hand there is no nice neat order of different complete philosophies: there are lots of ideas, conjectures about various fields. And these make pretty much of a mess. There's a big tangle. A few months ago, at the Technische Universität in Berlin, where I had another very pleasant visit, I gave an impromptu talk called "Untangling Nelson Goodman" and I said, 'Well, here's all this mess and can I do anything about untangling these things?'. The answer was that I couldn't do very much.

I mean, for instance, I had dealt with certain topics many different times and in many different contexts; but it is not always clear how these relate to one another. And so perhaps I should try to make it clear. All I could do is to suggest some of the different attacks that I had made on some of the problems at different times and at least note that these were not all part of a well organized

scheme. They were all different attempts to deal with different aspects of the problem. And then it occurred to me that untangling this mess might entail a good deal of loss, the kind of loss that you get if you try to untangle a plate of spaghetti: you would end up with some rather uninspiring strings of dough which would not have anything of the central quality of the whole meal. So I decided not to try to do that. Talking about my philosophy would mean talking about my philosophies. That means about different approaches to the same problem.

One of the big proposals was that the philosophy of art had yielded no very valuable contributions in philosophy at all. What existed in philosophical aesthetics didn't seem to me to be arriving anywhere or saying very much. But there is a great unity between artistic work and work in science. After all, all work in science and all the work in art is by way of a set of symbols. Perhaps we could learn something by a comparative study. Indeed we couldn't do this unless we'd had some experience with one or the other field. But, let's see what happens.

Although the inclusion of art as a legitimate part of human understanding and human activity was the *impetus*, I was equally concerned with whatever could be learned about the nature of science from this comparison. Of course, the background assumption was that art and science had nothing at all to do with each other. As a result, instead of looking to see what communities obtain between the two things, we were faced with the very difficult problem 'how do they differ?' We have lots of communities, they are all symbols, different kinds of languages, different kinds of symbol systems, and what distinguishes one from the other?

I attacked this problem half a dozen times in various parts of my work and what I said was very different in different cases. And it would be very hard to organize it together. So I tried to deal with that problem.

I consider for example the difference between pictures and descriptions. These were two ways of putting forth information or of understanding and the question was 'How do they differ?' Well, one of the things I had in mind was: how is it that texts — literary works and so on — are digital and pictures and related systems are not? It's a difficult thing to work out what this amounts to and what is the proper notion of digital.

That was fine but it soon appeared that that may work pretty well for the difference between pictures and descriptions, but it had two flaws: it didn't work for some other arts, and it didn't work for the difference between a poem and a book of instructions, since they

both belong to digital systems. So something more had to be done about that. In the case of the visual, it didn't account for the difference between a diagram and a picture, a painting.

One of the things we have to learn, in order to do anything about art and the other forms of human understanding, is to recognize that there was not just one sort of art (just pictures). We have to take account of architecture, and dance and music. For instance, classical musical scores have a digital notation, but the musical works are not digital as well.

So we have to do with many forms of art, that's one thing, and then we have to avoid confusing the notion of art with the notion of good art, with the notion of effective art. The sad truth is that, if you think of it, most works of art are bad. All you have to do is to go looking at most exhibitions and none of them are very good. Only a few of them are good, occasionally. So the idea that you reach art when you just get good enough, that you reach the level of art, this is not good either. What's the trouble? I introduced the notion of symptoms: indications that symbols are functioning aesthetically were like symptoms of diseases. Then I realized that it was not a very good idea because it's true that some of these symptoms are common to certain arts and others are not, but so many times some other symptoms are present and in other cases all the symptoms are present and we still don't have a distinction.

We end up with some kind of attempt to organize this problem in the last pages of *Reconceptions in Philosophy*, a book written with Catherine Elgin. When I looked at those few pages I said 'It's not right either' because what we have to realize is that we have a good distinction for instance between pictures and descriptions, perhaps, in terms of 'digital' and so on, but that doesn't distinguish works of art from other things because there are analog things which meet all the criteria but which are not works of art. Instead of focusing on the symptoms idea, which is not wholly bad, what we were doing was trying to distinguish works of art from everything else and that is typical.

But what we had to realize is that the central question had to be broken down and we had to say: 'How do we distinguish pictures from descriptions?'. This has nothing to do with the aesthetic difference between pictures and descriptions because we put on the one side fat instruction books and we put on the other side any sort of visual thing; we don't distinguish between a Hokusai drawing of the top of a mountain and the same line as a stock market graph. One of the differences here may be that in some cases one of these is digital and one of these is analog, but that doesn't always work because in some comparable cases the analog is interpreted in terms of financial or other terms or can be put in digital form.

So all we were distinguishing here were two classes of things that had nothing to do with the difference between what is art and what is not art. Now we've got to realize that that problem of definition has got to be thrown out of the window. If we ask this way 'What's the difference between pictures and descriptions?', the question doesn't capture the whole thing. We have to divide the problem. It is never characterized as 'How do we distinguish so and so from everything else?'. That is almost always impossible. Instead, we have to characterize the problem as 'how can I distinguish this from that — which is its nearest competitor?'

Well there would be lots of things to say but it's time I stop. Such progress as might have been induced by what I have written has not been a matter of providing answers to the unanswered previous questions in aesthetics, because every time we attacked one of those problems, we found that it is an unacceptable problem, I mean a problem in terms of wrong concepts. And we have to revise them.

We end up by having to revise the very terms in which the problems are stated, so that we end up not with a lot of answers to the old questions but showing that the old questions are in unacceptable terms. And this results pretty much to reconceiving philosophy entirely and that's why *Reconceptions* was written.

We had to divide and the result of these divisions is in the end to drop most of the traditional notions used in the talking about science, about art and about other things and do away with a lot of basic concepts, and the notion of the 'given', the notion of 'truth'. We do not give up truth, but we no longer think of philosophy as a process in which you find something certain and then you derive, and each time what has been derived inherits the truth. It's not like that because lots of things can be true but that's not the only criterion of what we call rightness in a statement: if I ask you 'What's the weather like outside?' and you say 'Ten times three is thirty', the answer is true but not right.

There's one other topic that I must speak of. People have asked sometimes recently: well here's some work in aesthetics and it's supposed to be an advance in aesthetics. But isn't it cutting out all that is really important in aesthetics, all the so called pleasure and value? And my answer is 'No, I don't think so'. I say, for instance, in a rave review of Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, that it's not the job of a philosopher of art to reject, say, modern art, to make particular distinctions and particular judgments about works of art, and I still think this, you see. The philosopher of art is not as such in a position to be judging 'This work is good' and 'That work is bad'. The task of a philosopher is to describe the general considerations on which such decisions are based. And I think that it's an important distinction

between the philosophy of art, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of anything else and the subjects they study; the philosopher of geology, or biology or of whatever you like is not supposed to do those sciences and the philosopher of art is not supposed to make decisions about particular works of art, but only to describe the general means, and so on.

This is a long topic but I'll stop. Thank goodness, it is not always predictable: men of my age become garrulous all the time, especially under circumstances like these. But I'm stopping. Thank you.