PATHS FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART TO EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

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Published in Helsinki, Finland by the Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019

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How Art Teaches: A Lesson from Goodman

Abstract

It is often thought that art teaches us and that we can learn from it. To learn that p is to come to know that p. So, art can teach us only if we can gain knowledge through art. How is this possible? Nelson Goodman tries to explain it by his theory of symbols. However, his theory just explains how works of art can refer to the world, and referring to the world is not enough for having knowledge about the world. Because knowledge is a matter of having true beliefs, in order to give us knowledge, works of art must say something that is true. It is argued that we can explain how they can do this, if we revise and supplement certain aspects of Goodman's theory of symbols. Furthermore, we can even explain how our built and natural environment can teach us.

Introduction

Artists typically think that they are doing research. They study the world and want to say something about it through their art. For example, in a recent documentary,[1] Martin Scorsese was asked why Woody Allen has made so many movies. He answered: "Because he has so much to say." One hears this sort of statement every day—even from abstract artists. They think they do research, study reality. If this is what artists do—if they say things through their art—then at least sometimes what they say is true, and we can know that it is true. So, art can teach us, and we can learn from it. We can attain knowledge through art.

Sometimes, philosophers seem to concur with this view, even enthusiastically, as Nelson Goodman does:

1 *Woody Allen: A Documentary – Manhattan, Movies & Me* (2012), directed by Robert B. Weide.

> [T]he arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding.
>
> (Goodman 1978, 102.)

However, it is very difficult to explain how art can advance knowledge. For example, Goodman is forced to concede that it is not knowledge in its ordinary sense that he has in mind but understanding. I think we should not yet give up. Indeed, we can learn from Goodman how art can give us quite ordinary propositional knowledge if we make some changes in his view.

Goodman's attempt to explain how art can teach consists of three steps: The first is to explain how works of art can refer to the world, how they can work as symbols. Goodman does this in his influential book *Languages of Art* (1968). In this work, he provides a general theory of symbols and explains how works of art can refer in terms of it. It seems clear that they must refer to the world to give knowledge about it.

He takes the second step in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), where he considers all uses of symbols—in art, science and everyday perceptions—and argues that all our access to the world comes through the use of symbols, and that symbols are not devices for describing the world waiting to be discovered, but ways of making the worlds referred to. There is no ready-made world that exists independently of our ways of describing it. We make the world when we correctly describe it through symbols. Furthermore, because there are alternative and incompatible ways of doing this, there are many worlds if any, says Goodman.

The third step, which he takes in his book with Catherine Elgin *Reconceptions in Philosophy & Other Arts & Sciences* (1988), is to replace our ordinary concept of knowledge with the broader concept of understanding. The problem with our ordinary concept of knowledge is that it applies only to declarative sentences that can be used to say something about the world, something that is true. The concept of understanding is supposed to cover also non-declarative uses of symbols—symbols that refer but do not say anything and therefore lack truth-value. So, because the scope of the

ordinary concept of knowledge is so narrow, we need the wider concept of understanding to explain the cognitive significance of all uses of symbols.

I think that the second and third steps are unnecessary, and it is best to avoid them. We can be realists and monists and believe that there is only one world that exists largely independently of us, and that art can give us knowledge about it in its quite ordinary sense. We can avoid these steps if we revise and supplement certain aspects of Goodman's theory of symbols.

GOODMAN'S THEORY OF SYMBOLS: THE BASICS

Goodman's theory has only two primitive (undefined) terms: "reference" and "denotation". The term "symbol" is defined in terms of reference:

A is a symbol for B if and only if A refers to B.[2]

An important type of reference is denotation. Denotation is illuminated by giving examples of it. The paradigm examples are singular terms and predicates of ordinary language: Proper name and singular term "Johnny Depp" denotes Johnny Depp. Predicate "tiger" denotes tigers. And predicate "red" denotes red things.

Goodman (1968, 3–19) argues that pictorial representation or depiction is a form of denotation. It is not a matter of resemblance or imitation. Pictures do not copy the world. They are symbols that denote their subjects. He thinks also that a picture can work, like a proper name, and denote uniquely one particular thing. For example, the picture of Johnny Depp denotes Johnny Depp. But he also thinks that a picture can work, like a predicate, and denote multiply each of a whole group of objects. For example, the picture of a tiger in a dictionary denotes all tigers.

Symbols belong to a symbol system, which connects the symbols of the

2 There are symbols that do not refer, such as letters, syncategorematic terms and symbols in fiction. In their case, we use the word "symbol" as a one-place predicate. This is a derivative use of the term, because even these symbols belong to symbol systems that have a referring function.

system with their referents (objects referred to). When we know the system, we know what its symbols refer to. Goodman takes symbol systems to be kinds of conventions. They are based on our practices of using symbols of different kinds. For example, styles in the visual arts, such as impressionism, realism and cubism, are examples of pictorial symbol systems (Goodman 1968, 127–173).

II
EXEMPLIFICATION

A great innovation of *Languages of Art* is its explanation of how purely abstract works, such as abstract paintings and pieces of instrumental music, can refer and thus symbolize. Goodman calls this symbolic function exemplification (Goodman 1968, 45–95).

Because abstract works represent nothing, it is their own properties that are important. Goodman's idea is that these works refer to their own properties. They exemplify their properties. The idea is not trivial, because objects do not exemplify all their properties.

As an example of exemplification, Goodman (1968, 53–54) gives a sample in a tailor's sample book. It exemplifies color, weave, texture and pattern but not size, shape or weight. In the same way, an abstract painting exemplifies forms, colors, structures and feelings but not weight or value. It only exemplifies properties that are important to it as a work of art.

As a nominalist, Goodman (1968, 54–57) thinks that strictly speaking there are no properties. So, in careful language, we must replace the talk of properties with the talk of predicates or other denoting symbols, which he calls labels. We can therefore define exemplification in terms of denotation and reference.

A exemplifies label B if and only if B denotes A and A refers to B.

For example, instead of exemplifying the property of blueness, a painting exemplifies the predicate "blue" that denotes it. Or, if the painting is sad, it exemplifies the predicate "sad" that denotes it. Of course, the predicate

"sad" cannot denote a painting literally. A painting is a physical object that lacks feelings, yet it can be metaphorically sad. The predicate "sad" denotes paintings and other works of art metaphorically. When a painting exemplifies the predicate "sad" metaphorically, Goodman (1968, 85–95) says that it expresses sadness. Expression is a matter of metaphorical exemplification.

There are also complex referential relations that consists of steps of denotation and exemplification. For example, when a painting exemplifies the predicates "blue" and "sad" that, in turn, denote other blue and sad things in the world, the painting indirectly refers to those things. Therefore, even abstract works that represent nothing can refer to things outside them and contribute to worldmaking (Goodman 1984, 61–63).

III
KNOWLEDGE AND SYMBOLS

Now we can understand why Goodman wants to replace our ordinary concept of knowledge with the concept of understanding. Knowledge—in its ordinary sense—is a propositional attitude. It has a propositional content that is expressed by a that-clause. For example, I know that it is summer. I know that we are in Helsinki. "That it is summer" and "that we are in Helsinki" express propositions or thoughts (as Frege called them). Let's assume that S stands for a person and *p* stands for a proposition. We get the following definition.

S knows that *p* if and only if

S believes that *p*,

p is true and

x (justification, reliability, sensitivity, safety or . . .)

There is a debate about *x*—the condition that converts true belief into knowledge—among epistemologists, but we need not worry about that. We can just assume that, if the first two conditions are satisfied, the third condition is often satisfied as well. If art can give us true beliefs, it can most likely give us knowledge as well.

According to Goodman, works of art refer to the world, but they do not say anything true about the world. What is said is a proposition. Some works of art do not express propositions or thoughts about the world: Pictures, abstract paintings and musical works do not have propositional contents at all. Though fictional literary works have propositional contents, their contents are false according to Goodman (1984, 123–126), because there are no fictional entities. So, art cannot give knowledge, because it does not give us true propositions that are necessary for knowledge.

A further problem is that Goodman (1972, 221–238) does not accept propositions at all. They are abstract and intensional entities that he does not accept into his worlds. For him knowledge is an attitude toward declarative sentences or statements rather than to the contents of sentences—propositions. The scope of knowledge is therefore restricted to what can be articulated in language, which already rules out visual arts and music as sources of knowledge.

Goodman's (1988, 153–166) move is to suggest that the concept of knowledge should be replaced with the broader concept of understanding and to argue that merely referring, non-declarative, symbols can advance understanding. As I said, we should avoid this move.[3] The problem is not in our concept of knowledge. It is part of Goodman's philosophical program, which does not allow propositions. If we can appeal to the existence of propositions, we can explain how art of all kinds can express propositions and say something and advance knowledge. Propositions, unlike sentences, are non-linguistic. So, also nonverbal symbols, in visual arts and music, can in principle express propositions. We just need one further move.

3 It may also be useless, because understanding appears to be a propositional attitude as well. For example, I understand why John is angry. Anyway, Goodman does not provide sufficient explication of his concept of understanding.

IV
DIRECT REFERENCE AND SINGULAR PROPOSITIONS

John Hawthorne and David Manley write in their *Reference Book* (2012, 4): "The discovery of the twin categories of [direct] reference and singular thought [proposition] is widely felt to be one of the landmark achievements of twentieth-century analytic philosophy." Both categories derive from Bertrand Russell's philosophy, and they are widely accepted in current philosophy of language. The problem of Goodman's project is that it rejects both categories. I suggest that we follow Russell and contemporary philosophers of language and add an account of direct reference to Goodman's theory of symbols and that we also accept propositions, properties and relations. Then we can explain how all art can express propositions and thus advance propositional knowledge.

The Russellian idea is quite intuitive. The content of a sentence is a proposition. This is what we say or assert when we utter the sentence. The content of a proper name is the object it refers to. Its semantic role is simply to pick out the object we want to talk about. So, this is what it brings to the content of a sentence. The content of a predicate is a property or relation it expresses. The role of a predicate is to express what we say about the object—what properties we attribute to it. This is what it brings to the proposition. Thus, a singular (Russellian) proposition consists of objects and properties or relations. For example, the sentence "John is tall" expresses the proposition that John is tall, which consists of John and the property of tallness. The sentence "John loves Mary" expresses the proposition that John loves Mary, which consists of John, Mary and the loving-relation.

Russell (1956, 201) thought that only demonstrative pronouns "this" and "that" are genuine proper names (or singular terms). Contemporary philosophers of language typically take directly referring expressions to include also ordinary proper names, like "John" and "Mary", and indexicals, such as "here", "now", "you", "I", "he", and "she". (What indexicals refer to depend on the context, in which they are used).

There is a dispute about what direct reference is based on. Russell (1956, 201) thought that it is based on direct awareness of the object referred to. Saul Kripke (1980) thinks that there must be a causal or historical connection between the object and our use of the term. At least, when it comes to art, we can be rather liberal: it is something in the context, in which we use the symbol, that determines the referred object—perhaps it is some causal relation to the object or just our intention to refer to it. So, in order to know what a symbol refers to, it is not enough to know the linguistic conventions or the symbol system, as Goodman thinks. We must also know the context, in which the term or symbol is used.

We can now see that propositions are non-linguistic: they consist of real objects and properties or relations that are bound together. So other symbols than sentences can in principle express propositions and thus say something.[4] This is possible, if we could just find the semantic roles of singular terms and predicates in the symbols. I think we can.

V
THE PROPOSITIONAL CONTENTS OF PICTURES AND ABSTRACT WORKS

Because propositions are non-linguistic, there is no problem for non-verbal symbols, such as pictures and samples, to express propositions and to say something about their objects. Instead of Goodman's single symbolic function, denotation, we just need a double function: each symbol must both pick out an object and attribute properties to it (both refer to an object and describe or characterize it). Then the referred object and attributed properties constitute the proposition that the symbol expresses. I think that our ordinary practice of using symbols supports this view of their content.

4 This is true even if propositions are understood as sets of possible worlds rather than Russellian structured entities. See, for example, Lycan (2008, 126–129).

Suppose there is a photograph of one of two identical twins. Nobody can distinguish the twins from each other just by looking. Which of them does the photograph depict? It seems that Goodman would have to say that it denotes both, because both have the properties that the photo attributes to its object (or, in Goodman's words, both are denoted by the photo according to the relevant symbol system). This cannot be right. Of course, we say that the photo is only of one of them, the twin whom it is taken of. It is of the one who was present when the photo was taken and reflected the light that went through the lens of the camera. We must therefore distinguish between the object that the photo directly refers to and what the photo tells or shows about that object. So, we have here the double symbolic function of referring and describing that determines the proposition expressed by the photo. It is the causal relation to the object that determines the referent.

With paintings, things are somewhat different. It may be plausible that a portrait refers to the person who sat for the artist and tells something about her. However, the object (or subject) of a painting is not always the sitter. For example, an artist may use a prostitute as a sitter for a painting about Virgin Mary. Yet, the painting represents Virgin Mary rather than the prostitute. It seems that here it is the artist's intention that determines the depicted object. Typically, this is also disclosed in the title of the work. Once again, we have the double function of picking out an object and saying something about it and thus a proposition expressed.

A picture, like a sentence, can therefore have a propositional content. The content is just much more complex and fine-grained than the content of a sentence. The number of properties that a picture attributes to the subject is huge, and we cannot completely express them in words. We simply lack words for all those properties. A picture is worth of thousand words.

The same is true of samples–Goodman's exemplifying symbols. For example, swatches of cloth in a tailor's sample book do not just exemplify certain of their own properties. They also refer to the ready suit and say that it will have those properties. This is the whole point of the sample. It gives information about the suit that does not yet exist.

Also, abstract works of art can express propositions. It is just required that they somehow pick out objects, to which they attribute the properties

they exemplify. Sometimes the title of the work discloses the object. Sometimes artists themselves tell us what their works are about. For example, Dmitri Shostakovich tells that all his symphonies beginning from the fourth are about Soviet life under the rule of Stalin (Volkov 2004).[5] Even purely instrumental music can exemplify feelings and other properties that it attributes to an object. It can express propositions, which once again are hard or impossible to express in words or in any other way.

So, pictures and even abstract works can express propositions and advance our knowledge about the world. However, there is a problem. Works of art, not only in literature but also in other arts, are typically fictional. There are no objects referred to, because there really are no fictional entities, such as Sherlock Holmes or Anna Karenina. Neither are typical abstract works thought to refer to anything: the artist gives no hints about the referred object; neither do the receivers look for it. I have two solutions to these problems: First, the use of a symbol that expresses an incomplete or false proposition can pragmatically implicate a proposition that is true. Second, abstract works that do not refer to the world outside of them can refer to and say something about themselves.

VI
FICTION

Because there are no fictional entities, fictional names are empty or meaningless and fictional sentences (and pictures) do not express complete propositions. A part of the proposition, the object referred to, is missing. Fictional sentences say nothing; they are neither true nor false. This is a problem, if we think that fiction can teach us something about the real world.

Kendall Walton (1990) suggests a solution. By using fictional sentences, we do not really say anything, but we pretend to say something. Fiction is a

5 I don't deny that we can listen to those symphonies without knowing this and without taking them to say anything about matters outside music. See below!

matter of make-believe. However, this solution does not yet answer our core question: How can fictional works say anything about the real world? I think they do tell about the world. They just do not say it directly or literally. They pragmatically imply or implicate it. This is a common feature of ordinary language. Suppose somebody asks me about my student Tom, whether he is good in philosophy, and I reply: "He has a nice handwriting." Even if I don't say it literally, I implicate that he is not good in philosophy (Grice 1989, 22–40).

Not only true sentences–or the utterances of these sentences–can pragmatically implicate something. Uttering a false sentence can implicate something that is true. Metaphors are like this. They are literally false, but can implicate something true. For example, if I say, "My love is a rose", I literally say something that is false. My love is not a plant. But this is not what I want to convey to you. I want to inform you about some of her characteristics.

If a false sentence can be used to pragmatically implicate something that is true, so can sentences, by which we pretend to say something and which lack a truth-value. Though fictional sentences and pictures do not literally say anything, they can pragmatically implicate something that is true about the real world.

The Bible gives a nice example of this: King David saw beautiful Bathsheba, send for her, slept with her, and made her pregnant. After failing to get her husband, Uriah, to think he was the father of the child, David arranged for Uriah to be killed. Then the prophet Nathan came to David and told the following story about a rich man and a poor man:

> The rich man had many flocks and herds; the poor man had only one lamb, which grew up with his children, ate at his table, lay at his bosom and was like a daughter to him. The rich man had an unexpected quest. Instead of slaughtering one of his own sheep, he slaughtered the poor man's only lamb and served it to his guest.

King David exploded in anger: "The man who did this deserves to die!" Then Nathan turned to David, pointed to him and declared: "You are that man!"[6]

6 This version of the story is from Alvin Plantinga (2000, 452) who uses it for a different purpose.

This is a fictional, make-believe, story, but it is supposed to tell or implicate some truths about David. It does not explicitly say what those truths or propositions are. Perhaps, it is something obvious (that David did something morally wrong). Perhaps, it is difficult or impossible to put into exact words. Anyway, the story tells David something about him: it conveys a singular proposition about him (perhaps a moral proposition). He attains new knowledge about himself. Fiction is here used as a source of self-knowledge. This is surely an important kind of knowledge that fiction can give us.

The story also illustrates the fact that what fiction implicates is context-sensitive. To somebody else, the story may tell something different—perhaps some general propositions about rich people and poor people or about life generally. Aristotle thought so. He said in *Poetics*: "Poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars" (Aristotle 1995, 1451b).

People have a strong tendency to generalize on the basis of a few particular cases, perhaps just one. Some psychologists and philosophers take this tendency to be irrational, but if nature works in a law-like manner, this way of forming beliefs may very well be quite rational and reliable (Kornblith 1993, 87–96). This tendency extends to merely imagined cases and explains how and why we can learn not just singular but general truths from fiction. It is equally important that fiction can give counterexamples to generalization and prejudices that we already have. Fiction advances knowledge also by correcting our mistakes.

VII
LEARNING FROM ABSTRACT WORKS AND ENVIRONMENT

It is true that many abstract works—paintings, pieces of music and buildings—are not thought to refer. Goodman says that also these works refer by exemplifying their own properties. This is true, if exemplification is a form of referring, but this does not explain how such works can say something. However, it is quite natural to understand these

sorts of exemplifications as a form of saying. We interpret these works as referring to themselves and saying that they have these properties. For example, sad music does not just refer to sadness; it says that it is sad. Of course, the properties need not be so obvious as sadness. They can be very complex and delicate, and it can require expertise to detect them.

So, some works of art teach us something about themselves. We learn that they have certain properties. This can hardly be denied, but does this not trivialize the idea that art teaches or advances knowledge? It does not, if the truths that art teaches are important. A work of art does not say about all its properties that it has them. It only says this about some of its properties—the important ones.

To Monroe Beardsley's criticism that the whole idea of exemplification might be dropped without loss, that mere possession of properties is all that matters, Goodman gives the following response:

> Surely he does not suppose that critical comment consists of random listing of properties a work possesses, or that understanding a work amounts to noting such properties indiscriminately. A vital part of aesthetic understanding, especially but not exclusively in the case of abstract works, is determining which among its properties the work not only possesses but also conveys. The significant properties of a work, we might say, are those it signifies. This must be taken fully into account in one way or another, and my way is in terms of exemplification.
>
> (Goodman 1984, 84.)

We can follow Goodman and say that understanding a work does not consist of noting random facts about it. It consists of grasping what it says. This is something that we learn when we understand the work. Moreover, this is not restricted to worldly facts represented, but includes also some facts about the work itself. It is these facts that, according to Beardsley (1981, 530–531) himself, are the source of aesthetic value: recognizing them causes

us to have experiences that have intrinsic aesthetic value.[7] This should also satisfy the toughest formalists, who insist that only the form matters in a work of art, not its content. The form can constitute the only content that the work has.

When I take works of art to say and tell things or to speak to us, I don't mean that it is the artist that does these things through his or her art, though this may be true. I follow Goodman by thinking that it is not always the intention of the artist that determines what his or her work tells us. Neither does the work itself, independently of us, say anything. It is we who use works of art to tell things to ourselves. It is something in us, something in the way we use works of art that gives them the power to speak to us.

This being the case, there is no need to restrict these insights to art. In addition, even the built and natural environments can speak to us. Perhaps, it is art that has taught us to look at our environment in this way.

7 I said in an earlier paper that Goodman's response is unilluminating, because it does not tell why the exemplified properties are the significant ones (Lammenranta 1992, 344–351). Now, I think that those properties may have a purely aesthetic significance in Beardsley's sense, and that this does not compromise the idea of art saying things. I want to thank Hanne Appelqvist for this change of mind. She also pointed out that Wittgenstein may have something similar in mind. See her discussion of the relevant passage from Wittgenstein (1958, 166) in Appelqvist (forthcoming).

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