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INTER-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING AND ART \*

I wish to examine two opposing views about the possibility of understanding the art of other cultures:

1. The view that there is an inherent and insurmountable difficulty about understanding the art of cultures other than one's own. This view stems from a belief that since art is the expression of indigenous meanings and feelings of that culture then it follows that the outsider cannot possibly understand or even come to understand such art as what it expresses is outside his/her experience.
2. The classical view that art is unique in being a universal 'language'; a view supported by Kant's notion of community of taste and by Hegel's universal spirit.

The first important consequence of viewing cultures as somehow isolated in space and time is the recent emphasis on cultural relativism of which there are two main versions: strong and weak relativism. The strong relativists argue that the beliefs, social practices and conduct rooted in cultures other than one's own are only understandable and analysable by means of *the concepts* employed within these cultures and thus different conceptual schemes from our own are involved; standards of truth, rationality, right conduct and the expression of these in art are, therefore, inaccessible to members of our own culture because they are always relative to particular systems of thought.

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Most recent arguments about relativism<sup>1</sup> centre variously on attempts to expose or to rescue relativism from the charge of self-contradiction while seemingly accepting its central postulates regarding different conceptual schemes, etc. In other words, philosophers have concentrated on exposing contradictions in *statements* about the impossibility of making judgments and appraisals *resulting* from relativism rather than questioning the central thesis that all knowledge is relative to given cultures.

I do not wish to discuss the respective merits or demerits of the arguments mentioned above. My purpose is merely to outline the kind of philosophical issues which are raised in this context; issues which don't seem to tackle what I take to be the crux of the matter - why should one be inclined to accept any version of relativism which relies on stressing different conceptual frameworks and thus different systems of thought? Why not ask whether these claims make sense?

The claims of relativism can be interpreted in two ways: If the point is merely that we come to understand anything by virtue of the dispositions and standards which we have as members of the society to which we belong, then it is both a truism and a triviality. We cannot escape from our own skins in any of our activities, thoughts or judgments allowing, of course, for wide individual differences. But if relativism is intended to mean that we are all of us trapped in our understanding of and responses to others, acquired exclusively from our own societies, as if in tightly closed boxes, then the theory can be shown to be false because contrary to fact. Taken to its logical conclusion we are expected to accept that persons from other cultures raise similar problems that little green creatures from Mars would present to us; that they do not share our form of life, whatever the force of 'our' may be in this context. The inescapable conclusion from this version of relativism is that, as different conceptual schemes are involved in different cultures, this results in some different kind of knowledge and hence in different systems of thought and different ways of understanding. Therefore insurmountable difficulties arise about cross-cultural understanding and thus about the possibility of making any kind of judgments let alone aesthetic judgments. Further, our respect for persons from other cultures, on this view, entails never taking up a critical stance and never presuming to judge. What is completely overlooked in this position is that we cannot possibly respect something which we cannot understand. The notion of respect for persons, as invoked in this context, is utterly misconceived. The end product is a kind of isolationism, a moral,

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<sup>1</sup>B. Williams - *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, New York, Harper 1972; B. Williams - 'The Truth in Relativism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1974/5, pp 215-228; J. Meiland - 'Bernard Williams' Relativism', *Mind*, Vol. LXXXVIII, No. 550 pp 258-60.

intellectual, aesthetic and emotional self-imposed blindness; all of which finally amounts to advocating a course which is not, and never could be, practiced.

By contrast, the weak relativist, while still assuming the existence of different systems of thought and understanding, tries to take into account another person's cultural background with its prescribed norms, shared beliefs, etc., before passing judgment on his conduct. The weak relativist would put himself in the other's shoes, or empathize, in his/her attempts to see what it was that was exercising the other when confronted with an enthusiasm or distaste or indignation *that was rooted in his own culture*.

Weak relativism can be disposed of fairly easily if, as above, understanding of different cultures is made to be dependent on empathy.

Historically, the concept of empathy stems from the Greek use of 'Empatheis' and was originally used in an aesthetic context. One definition is: 'The power of entering into another's personality and imaginatively experiencing his experiences'. The analysis of the Greek word 'Em - pathos' literally translates to 'In - feeling' and the German 'Einfühlung' to 'Ein' (in) and 'Fühlung' (feeling).

Empathy, then, involves the notion of putting oneself in the other's place. What precisely is meant by this? There are at least two ways in which this could be done:

1. Putting myself in his place could be taken as equivalent to trying to understand how I would feel in his place or situation.
2. Putting myself in his place could also be taken as trying to understand how he feels in the situation he finds himself in.

The first alternative need not involve any real understanding of the person concerned; at most it need only involve a certain understanding of the situation itself and what my responses or feelings towards it would be like - this allows of the possibility of their being quite different from those of the subject.

The second alternative will not do as a condition for understanding because it presupposes too much. I must already have a very real understanding of the person concerned to enable me to become him, as it were. I must already know and understand what it is like to be him, the subject, before I can successfully experience his situation, as his. This is an important ability within an existing personal relationship which enables one to get yet further insights into the other's experiences but it is, without doubt, the end product of already existing

understanding, not a condition of it. It presupposes that which it is supposed to achieve.<sup>2</sup>

In as much as we can legitimately speak of knowledge as in any way culture bound, we can profitably do so in terms of interests of various cultures. I do not mean here 'interest' in Habermas' sense as I must confess that I cannot come to grips with his conception of 'constitutive interest' and its relation to his analysis of the categories of Interaction, Labour and Domination. I mean simply that different cultures will know more about certain particular areas of knowledge than about others. Cultures where technology is highly developed will, quite obviously, be expert in that kind of knowledge stemming from their predominant interests. Cultures which live constantly with the problems of, say, water shortage will know much about systems of irrigation and their predominant interest, stemming from their particular needs, will encourage the development of knowledge in this particular field. This is just a very crude example of the role of interest and its influence on knowledge. No culture has a single, over-riding interest, as my example may, unintentionally, imply but rather a complex, interrelated structure of interests arising from special cultural conditions. Taking knowledge as culture bound in this sense makes 'interest' not 'knowledge', relative and this kind of relativism is quite unexceptionable; it does not require any notion of different conceptual schemes or even anything vaguely similar. The direction which this kind of emphasis offers is on the possibility of learning about other people's conditions, interests and concerns in a way which becomes comparatively unproblematic as opposed to logically impossible for the weak or the strong relativist, both of whom deny that knowledge is objective.

That the above are, to say the least, grossly misleading approaches is very tellingly shown by Mary Midgley:<sup>3</sup>

...our own society... is a fertile jungle of different influences - Greek, Jewish, Roman, Norse, Celtic - into which further influences are still pouring - American, Indian, Japanese, Jamaican, you name it. If we think about this history for a moment, we can see that the ...picture of separate, unmixable cultures is quite unreal. The world has never been like that; it couldn't be like that... Except for the very smallest and most remote, *all* cultures are formed of many streams. All have the problem of digesting and assimilating things which, at the start, they don't understand. All have the choice of

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed discussion of this topic see F. Berenson, *Understanding Persons*, pub. Harvester Press Ltd. U.K., 1981 and St. Martin's Press Inc. New York, 1981.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Midgley, 'Trying out one's New Sword', Broadcast on BBC, published in *The Listener*, 15 December 1977.

learning something from the challenge, or, alternatively, of refusing to learn, and fighting it mindlessly instead.

The step from relativism in general to relativism in art is but a short one.

If art is an expression of culture, as is generally held, then it follows, from a relativist thesis, that we are incapable of understanding the art of alien cultures. This leads me directly to the influential Institutional Theory of Art. The main exponents of this theory are George Dickie<sup>4</sup> and Arthur Danto<sup>5</sup>. The Institutional Theory of Art is concerned very much with procedures *within* a given society, a given culture, which confer the status of an artwork on any artefact. This can be made clearer by an example. Dickie speaks of a painting is art depends upon what is done with it. So, if it should be exhibited in a natural history museum then it is not art but should it be exhibited in an Art Gallery then it is an art-work because the appropriate institution has conferred the status of art-work on it, by exhibiting it.

Works of art become artworks by virtue of given social/cultural conventions including the conventions which govern the use of language in communication and enable us to make judgments about works of art. Art is thus essentially institutional. This does not mean that there are necessarily institution-tokens corresponding to all these labels (some specific institutions such as the Old Vic) but that writing plays and poetry, painting, composing music and sculpture are recognized *social* practices; recognized in the sense that there are established institutional procedures for conferring the status of Artwork on the products of these practices.

Much has been written about this important theory and several criticisms have been offered of it. I do not propose to discuss the variety of complex issues arising from it as such. Instead, I shall raise some points on a later expression of the theory by Joseph Margolis<sup>6</sup> in his well known paper 'Works of Art as Physically Embodied and Culturally Emergent Entities'. This paper raises particularly interesting issues pertinent to the possibility of understanding the art of other cultures. I shall state his view briefly and then suggest one line of thought which, I hope, will yield an answer to the original question whether such understanding is possible.

Margolis writes that any work of art consists of two related aspects: Embodiment and Emergence. Works of art and persons are *embodied* in physical bodies and, in addition, they are also *culturally emergent entities*. As

<sup>4</sup>G. Dickie - 'What is Art' *Culture and Art*, ed. L. Aagaard Mogensen, Eclipse Books, New York Humanities Press, 1976, pp 21-32

<sup>5</sup>A. Danto - 'The Artworld', *Ibid.* pp 9-20

<sup>6</sup>J. Margolis - 'Works of Art as Physically Embodied and Culturally Emergent Entities', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol.14 No.3, 1974, pp 187-196

emergent entities they exhibit emergent properties. To be embodied in an object is not to be identical with it.

Margolis gives an example of this distinction:

Thus Michaelangelo's *David* may be identified and referred to as a sculpture embodied in a particular block of marble; ...Physical objects have the advantage of being identifiable in exclusively extensional terms: the block of marble in which the *David* is embodied may be validly ascribed properties regardless of the description under which it is identified;... physical objects have whatever properties they have, *qua* physical objects, independently of any cultural considerations and even independently of the existence of any culture;... But this is not true of culturally emergent entities... hence it is not true of works of art (or of persons or even actions ascribed to persons)....<sup>7</sup>

So reference to physical objects is extensional, in being context-free; and reference to works of art is intensional, in depending on the contextual assumptions of particular cultures.<sup>8</sup>

At this point we get an unequivocal statement asserting institutional relativism;

...a work of art can be identified as such *only relative* to a favourable culture with respect to the traditions of which it actually exists.<sup>9</sup> (My italics)

... works of art are identified intensionally *relative to cultural contexts* in which they may be said to be embodied in a physical medium; ... characterizations and appraisals of the work are relativized...<sup>10</sup> (My italics)

Finally Margolis says, in passing, that we treat works of art and persons as entities of a similar sort but he is not concerned with working out this analogy. I take the implications of this analogy to be of enormous importance particularly in areas where the threat of relativism looms large. These implications, therefore, merit a closer look.

As I see it, two important issues are raised by Margolis' paper which need to be answered.

1. Whether the culture bound relativity which enters into understanding works of art is of a kind which necessarily precludes understanding? In other words, we

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<sup>7</sup>J. Margolis - *ibid.* pp 187-89

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.* pp 191-92

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.* p 193.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* p 194

need first to answer the question whether cultures are remarkably and fascinatingly diverse or whether truth and logic, i.e., rationality itself, is culture dependent relative to some elusive and mysterious system?

2. What exactly is involved in his two levels of understanding: the extensional and the intensional, a distinction which brings in the analogy between persons and works of art.

First then, let us see what follows from Margolis' statement that 'a work of art can be identified *as such* only relative to a favourable culture...'. This statement represents a very extreme form of the Institutional Theory of Art; other, less extreme forms, also maintain that critical appraisal and appreciation make sense *only* within these societies from which standards and kinds of response stem.

It follows, from all versions of this theory, that we can only understand the art of other cultures from within the aesthetic framework of our own society. This involves observing how members of a given society respond to their works of art and then 'objectively' reaching certain conclusions which will, of course, be limited to the observer's own framework. Alternatively, and absurdly, it follows that if a stranger somehow succeeded in becoming involved in a given society to the extent that, in time, it became his own, he could not express this newly acquired understanding to members of his original culture because of the indigenous rules of language and conceptual schemes tied to a given culture's conventions. Yet this is obviously not the case. One might object that we have great difficulties with, e.g., the music of India or the Middle East; so we may have but the difficulties are *of the same kind* as those which one encounters on first hearing Schönberg or Alban Berg. One has to work at it in order to understand it, with no guarantee of success. One needs to learn something about the twelve tone system and about what such music is trying to achieve, how and why it differs from classical music, why it is mistaken to listen for melodic lines, and so on.

As for other kinds of art the same considerations apply. On first encountering Greek or Arab art in its natural setting, far from experiencing difficulties, the impact is so powerful as to almost defy description. The rule in Muslim art that there are to be no representations of living creatures is, again, not difficult to understand, neither is the fact that the rule was and is broken occasionally. One could again object that there are examples of art, e.g., some African or Brazilian art in which garish colours predominate in combinations which we find vulgar or crude. Apart from the very important consideration of local light, which has dramatic effects on colour combinations,

this kind of general criticism just will not do. The late Shah of Iran's Peacock Throne room is a good example. The throne room has, along both its walls, cases displaying gifts from various heads of state. The ugliest and most vulgar by far is a bronze ship with a clock stuck into its bowels. This gift was presented by Queen Victoria. No further comment is necessary, I think.

Carl Schnaase<sup>11</sup> the famous art historian writing as early as 1843, says:

... the art of every period is both the most complete and the most reliable expression of the national spirit in question, it is something like a hieroglyph... in which the secret essence of the nation declares itself, concealed, it is true, dark at first sight but completely and unambiguously to those who make the effort to read these signs.

Effort, sometimes formidable and sustained, is necessary to understand any unfamiliar art. Our efforts may often lead us astray. But, as Kierkegaard<sup>12</sup> says, false ideas refute themselves in experience and, if that is resisted, they lead to a disintegration of a personality instead of to its unification. This point is important in our attempts to understand other cultures as well as our own. If our attempts to understand are inadequate or misguided then they lead to a kind of disintegration which manifests itself in a negative puzzlement where ultimately any possibility of understanding slips from our grasp.

In answer to our first question then, we can say that Margolis' claim that understanding is culture dependent relative to some elusive framework of rationality can be shown to be false because it is contrary to fact. Cultural diversity does not imply cultural isolationism.

We now turn to extensional and intensional understanding. For Margolis, these focus respectively on *embodiment*, the physical, context free 'body' (material) which contains the work of art or persons, and *emergence*, which contains expressions of feelings and emotions indigenous to a given culture and so 'emergence' brings in the notion of what a work of art *means* to members of the given culture relative to its institutional or cultural context.

Margolis' notion of embodiment seems to have a clear application where sculpture, architecture and paintings are concerned but it is not at all obvious what would count as equivalent to the slab of marble, in which *David* is embodied, in the case of music, literature and dance. If, in the case of music, we take embodiment to be marks on paper, as Margolis suggests, then we get the same sort of embodiment for music as for literature. Perhaps that, in itself,

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<sup>11</sup>C. Schnaase - *Geschichte der Bildenden Kunst* 1, Leipzig 1843

<sup>12</sup>S. Kierkegaard - *Fear and Trembling*, Princeton University Press 1968



is not a serious objection but it is not at all clear that marks on paper is what embodies music because rhythms (tone) are an essential part of music. It is very difficult to decide here what the physical body or material is. Similar difficulties arise in the case of dance. It is not *just* the human body which embodies dance because, again, at least rhythm also is involved. Even in the case of the piece of stone, in which *David* is embodied, we cannot say that the identification of the stone is contextfree because it is a particular *kind* of marble which was chosen to embody *David*, it was chosen with *David* in mind. Not just any kind of stone would have done for Michelangelo; his decision was an aesthetic decision. Margolis says that physical objects have physical properties *qua* physical objects and are, therefore, context-free. But the physical marks on paper have certain physical characteristics (shapes) which are only understandable, identifiable and describable from within the context of music or the written language of the novel.

As for *emergence*, to understand, say, the music of any culture involves certain capacities for experience that are in an important sense *sui generis*. Thus understanding is not the same state of mind in all cases. Emergence necessitates what I call 'personal understanding' which is decisive to one's appropriate relationship with the work and which depends on one's capacity of being aware of the work in a certain way. It is undeniable that practices are always partially, even if to different degrees, constituted by what certain people think and feel about them. In order to discover this we face the difficulty of translation between *the subject's* and *the observer's* respective thoughts and feelings and this is of paramount importance to the kind of understanding of another that one is capable of achieving, either cross-culturally or within one's own culture.

When contemplating a work of art we need to discover what the terms which the natives use in talking about art really mean to them; what is the role played by these terms within their culture or, generally, within their experience. We need to understand something of the persons from whom the works stem. We need to be aware of the danger of ethnocentrism and egocentrism in any form of understanding, in any kind of interpretation, particularly that based on observation only. The experiences of another person recounted, explained or described in an observer's own terms may bear little or no relation to the subject's experience. This point is also related to my earlier discussion of empathy.

At this stage a mere analogy between works of art and persons undergoes a dramatic shift. We now have to enter the area of the Philosophy of Persons in order to give an account of how this kind of subjective meaning is to be understood. An insistence on methods of observation and interpretation

of various practices, on the grounds that such a method guarantees objectivity, indeed creates insurmountable difficulties for understanding persons and how they feel about things which are important to them.

On a certain level of understanding we enter into the area of personal understanding in general and what works of art mean to individuals, in particular. This brings in an understanding of the kinds of feelings, emotions and commitments which play a crucial part in aesthetic experience. For example, we need to understand something of the religious feelings which are an integral part of the Dervish dance and of the total emotional and intellectual abandonment to prayer and communion with God. Greek folk dancing also involves much more than sheer enjoyment. It is a visual, deeply emotional expression of the very complex Greek character which requires a complex understanding of the historical and the emotional life of the persons concerned. This kind of understanding cannot be achieved purely by observation. In order to understand something of what a particular work of art *means* to a person who is a member of a given culture we need to understand something of that person. That is why, instead of a mere analogy, we find a conceptual dependence on understanding *persons* for understanding *particular aesthetic experiences*. This involves having a sense of what the given person might do or think, in different situations, just as one often 'knows' what the music (composer) might do next.

It is important to note what follows from this relationship; to understand a work of art depends on understanding something of the artist. In our own culture this demands understanding something of the artistic background from which the work stems, e.g., El Greco and his religious expression, Duchamp and his anti-art statements, the classical tradition or, to repeat, Schönberg's twelve tone scale, the notion of sound patterns as opposed to melodic lines, etc. Cross-culturally, this means that in order to understand the art of a particular culture we need to understand something of the people who create it and understand something of their feelings. As already mentioned, we also need to understand why living things are not represented in Muslim art and then judge it and appreciate it within the right categories for instance, as a result of this rule, we find highly developed intricate, often very delicate, geometric patterns and the powerful conception of the intertwining design of the arabesque in painting and sculpture which has been transferred to western music and dance so very successfully. An important aspect of art is that such transference and development are possible. The creative impulse is exclusively human and therefore universal. So is the appeal which art has. Any difficulties which arise about understanding are, therefore, also universal, not cultural, as alleged, in some mysterious way.

Given this crucial, shared starting point, understanding can develop at various levels; we can now deal with any difficulties arising because:

1. They cease to be mysteries, and
2. They are now seen as difficulties of a different kind.

Now we can speak in terms of understanding what a particular reality consists in, in terms of what bearing such understanding has on the life of individual persons who are also members of society; what a given activity means to the agent, his emotional response and his perception of special qualities and meanings in the work of art. It is only in reciprocal personal relationships that subjective aspects of a person's life have a chance of spontaneously and fully manifesting themselves.

Attitudes, purposes and reciprocal responses which manifest themselves *naturally* are of crucial importance here. These are lacking in cases of knowledge by observation. The point is *not* that we cannot come to know a person's subjective side by observation but rather that the resulting understanding is limited and qualitatively different. We have no experience of the reciprocal development of understanding nor have we the means of checking whether our understanding is correct. It is only on a personal level, as a result of sustained inter-action, shared time and shared activities, that mistaken understanding is exposed and corrected. This understanding just cannot be achieved by observation alone, a method which results from a misguided obsession with what is supposed to be objectivity.

One could go on multiplying examples but my main point was to bring out what I take to be a most important phenomenon which tends to occur whenever we talk about cultures other than our own. We seem to be *looking for* mysteries and difficulties instead of using familiar, everyday criteria to assess situations. There is a presupposition about difficulties in understanding which has most adverse consequences, more often than not, quite unnecessarily. The significant point which emerged from the controversy about the TV documentary *The Death of a Princess* was that, in the discussions between the interviewers and the various Saudi Arabians involved in the case, there was no particular difficulty regarding criteria of rationality, as was amply demonstrated by the justifications offered. The difficulty arose from differing views about suitable punishment for various transgressions, a problem found in our own culture. In other words, the outcome of this particular debate was to show that to understand all does not necessarily mean to forgive all. The criteria used by both parties were familiar, objective criteria; familiar in the sense that they stem from a shared conceptual scheme. Without this precondition the discussions would not have been possible at all. We may find certain

attitudes wrong, barbaric, infuriating, frustrating or difficult to accept but these reactions on our part are only possible *as a result* of our understanding what is involved.

Given that anything intelligible is so by virtue of certain rules (I refer here to Wittgenstein's account of objectivity) then such rules are discoverable, at the very least, in principle, by other cultures who, as language speakers, are also familiar with the notion of a rule. I have, in effect, argued that there exists an important confusion in the area of inter-cultural understanding because we constantly confuse the understanding of something with the quite different notion of approving of certain practices. My last example illustrates exactly this point.

In so far as art is undoubtedly an expression of experience stemming from a way of life and from human emotions, any understanding of it must necessarily involve some understanding of that particular way of life; understanding which particular areas from an *objective range* of areas of knowledge a given society or a given person finds important. Understanding of anything at all, on a deep level, is never easy and requires a certain commitment and hard effort. There are enough problems about understanding people different from oneself and of understanding the expressions of their experiences in art, whether it be within a culture or cross-culturally without our adding gratuitous mysteries to this complex field. I have, in this paper, tried to plead that we exorcise this particular ghost.