10 AM - 1900s On art, consciousness, and society

"Thank you for your telephone call. I don't very often get calls from art museum directors asking if I'd be willing to speak to them. What subject are you looking to address?"

"Mostly we'd like to learn how your newsroom works, to know how to get better coverage for what we do."

"Public relations. Interestingly, the best advice I learned came from an attorney."

"An attorney? How did that help?"

"A lawyer's job, he explained, is to do the judge's job for him."

"I don't see the parallel."

"A judge is typically a very busy person, with a lot on the docket, and anxious to move on to the next case. An attorney who can prepare his brief in language and form the judge would normally use, makes it easier for the judge to adopt his client's position."

"What has that to do with newspapers?"

"The news editor, on deadline, is as busy as the judge. Your job is to do the editor's job for him. Write the way the editor would write. Include news the editor would include. No fluff. Write tight. Send a picture the editor's photographer would shoot."

"Would you meet with our group to say that?"

"You don't need me in person to make that point. Besides, what needs to be said is quite different."

"Something different we should hear?"

"Artists I know often posture that art *is* culture. They seldom appreciated the purpose of art preserving or encouraging society. They see culture represented by music, dance, cuisine, or poetry as fragile, perhaps helpless, and needing to be nurtured. But such

a superficial characterization of culture, describes outward trappings. As one blogger noted, that is no more culture than clothing is.

"The raiment of art is a trapping that can be adopted by any culture as its own without plumbing the depths of that culture's beliefs. Culture is a polity's collection of beliefs held most deeply and strongly. Superficial multiculturalism finds enrichment in different culture's art, music, or food but can easily miss the unchangeable underlying beliefs or their part in supporting it."

"You're telling me what art isn't."

"Art is the continuation of 10,000 years of humanity fighting for consciousness. Museums seldom reinforce the awesome power artists wield—to bring people to consciousness . . . even if you cannot necessarily keep them there."

"Is that a compliment or an accusation?"

"Well, you can also lead them away . . . but you have an opportunity to go beyond mere consciousness to describe the evolution of consciousness and explain what and why. Art has the power of the fictional narrative to convince or manipulate.

"What evolution of consciousness?"

"We don't have to go all the way back to cave art 10,000 years ago for examples. The 1300s experienced a cataclysmic change of mind, represented first in painting, and then in literature. Between 1310 and 1325 painters determined how to represent three-dimensional linear perspective on a two-dimensional space represented by a canvas.

"Art had created a metaphor that showed point of view differed according to where a person stood. Around 1348 Boccaccio wrote *The Decameron*, which presented perspectives from ten different characters. The concept of point of view leapt from painting, to literature, to every-day thought and people became more powerful thinkers for it."

"Perspective did not so dramatically appear. There were instances of it used earlier."

"To be sure, but the concept became more accessible to ordinary

people. Because of the examples, it could become easier to teach. We can think better than humans did 10,000 years ago, and absolutely have to. Yet, art is a mechanism that can be commandeered by either the powers of good or evil."

"That sounds overly dramatic."

"You can become a civilizing power by helping to inoculate people with the skills to defend themselves as they see fit. I don't need to explain Modernism..."

"Heh! No."

"Modernism in art reached perhaps from the 1870s to about 1970. It's parallel in literature was probably from the early 1900s to World War II.

"Modernism was 'self' conscious of consciousness. I'm more familiar with literature, but in art, Andy Warhol's MOMA exhibit of 32 canvasses of Campbell Soup cans drew people into consciousness to remind them of an everyday object that all too easily faded into the background."

"A wonderful piece of art."

" . . . whose societal opportunity is often overlooked."

"Opportunity?"

"Consciousness is a habit people mistakenly assume is ever-present. One can be called to consciousness when someone else asks if you are conscious. Drawn back to consciousness, it's too easy to presume it never to have disappeared. When art brings us again to consciousness reminds us consciousness *can* go missing."

"Why should I believe that?"

"Ask yourself, where does your vision end?"

"I'm not sure. It's not something I think about."

"There is no easily discernable boundary where eyesight ends. Tests have been devised that bring the boundaries of vision to consciousness, but without ingenuity and effort the edges of vision are out of sight and out of mind. Where is perception of consciousness taught in social institutions like schools or churches?

"Only incidentally."

"In classical Greece, Plato's Socrates spoke of the gadfly, stinging a horse to action. Thomas Mann, in *Magic Mountain* in the 1920s wrote of consciousness lost after surviving a snowstorm. In the 1950s and 1960s. Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* begins with Nick's reverie watching snow descend on a coal brazier. It brings to his consciousness the ancient world of legionnaires, mountain alders, and centaurs that recall his school days and a question of upbringing. Art draws us back to consciousness. What a great responsibility. Because we do not believe it gone, we give it no credit when, through art, we are brought back to it. Too easily the 'Hey! Pay attention!' of great literature just as quickly becomes the 'maybe not' of *Bachelor* or the *Jay Leno Show*."

"But art means different things to different people."

"To be sure, but beyond that, some concepts are accessible to others. People can read whatever they want in Tacitus' *Histories*. However, I need not I resign myself to moral relativism in Tacitus or in art. What makes Tacitus valuable is not authority, accuracy or precision, but his ability to recognize and label a pattern of behavior that we, in turn, detect in our own time."

"What then would you say to museum directors?"

"There are different ways to approach understanding. Author Robert Persig once explained people look at a gasoline engine valve shim and see different things. Some see what it is—a cold, greasy piece of metal—while others see what it does—hold a valve moving hundreds of times a minute at precisely the right height to control combustion. How you see something provides critical insight to your understanding of our world. Consciousness is a view that art lessons can teach. If not in art, where should respect for consciousness be taught?"

"How could it be taught?"

"Dutch artist M. C. Escher's drawings often use optical illusions that call upon recursion. Recursion is a tool, a computer programming technique where in order to efficiently solve a problem like the 'Tower of Hanoi' the program will invoke itself

again and again. Our brains think recursively. They can think about thinking about thinking about thinking . . ."

"Is that a useful tool?"

"Useful inside the mind and externally as well. For thinking it helps recognize the fragility of the only tool we have to negotiate our way through life, and externally, it allows us to examine, using the Hegelian or Marxian dialectic, the integrity of our plans over time."

"Feedback means one can take the consequences of thinking—the results—at the top level of this strange loop and input them as a factor again at the bottom level. It can be constructive or destructive. Recursion can act like a microphone attached to an amplifier held too close to a speaker, where the smallest sound gets repeatedly reinforced into an ear-splitting squeal. Or, suppose a monk under a vow of silence reaches such a state of contentment while meditating that he audibly sighs. Recognizing he broke his vow of silence, he says, 'Oops!' Recognizing his oops, he says 'Oops!', 'Oops!', 'Oops!' . . . oopsing infinitely. To invoke the same thought process again and again and again is recursion.

"Recursion is a process of the mind. If I hit my thumb with a hammer, I am in pain. When you are in pain, sometimes you are in pain and other times you are at a distance, not really feeling pain, thinking 'Oh, wow, that really hurt!', watching yourself feel the pain at a meta-cognitive level, then you remember that you had been hit and are back in pain. Such in and out looping also applies with anger and with grief. Loops are important. When I am in an argument, when I am discussing things, it is possible for me to stand aside and look at myself in that argument."

"That seems a useful, practical way to think about things, but I don't recall that we teach it."

"Conversation can be as recursively slippery as thoughts. R. D. Laing gave examples of such conversations in *Knots*. If you say to me, 'you snore too much' and I reply, 'All you ever do is gripe, gripe, gripe.' That itemizes two separate subjects worth discussing. One is the snoring, the second the repeated griping.

The ability to stand apart and look at the situation in perspective is one simple wisdom. Conversely, caught in your head, looping negatively, the loop is difficult to escape from intellectually without looping more. Effective action to recover requires getting out of your head—walk, sleep, read, exercise, or watch a Marx Brothers slapstick movie.

"Escher graphically represented recursion in *Print Gallery* where, in an art gallery window, a patron looks at a cityscape that contains a building that is an art gallery where, in a window, one can see a patron looking at a cityscape that contains a building that is an art gallery—an infinite loop. Art like that can help teach metaphors undreamed of a hundred or a thousand years ago."

"That would give one an advantage philosophers of the past did not have. Do other concepts matter?"

"To recognize our circumstance, it pays to have a well-developed sense of time and one's place in it. Sighting along time from the past, through the present, to the future is another check on the accuracy of what we think. People unpracticed in dialectics or feedback, who have been brought up in classical Newtonian physics, tend to snapshot the physical universe absent the continuum of time. Sight from the past as if looking along the frames of a piece of motion picture film, through the present, to possible futures, a sense of time and your place in it helps evaluate the gravity of potential decisions.

"That which distinguishes people from most animals is that we can plan for tomorrow. Like a child's Chinese toy yo-yo—a stick fastened to one end of a tightly rolled paper strip flicked forward with a snap of the wrist, we can repeatedly project into the future the potential results of different choices one might make. Intelligence can jump out of a task and survey from a different level the consequences of what it has done, creating the foundation of all sociability and the foundation of all ethics and morality.

"But why do we need that."

"Because, so far, we aren't terribly well equipped to deal with either one. We are in a big mess."

"How do we get out?"

"You are the only hope."

"Thanks, but I don't know how."

"Use your experience to figure out how. I have found no other way that works."

"Why not your way?"

"You trust your experience and can't trust mine. Socrates said this couldn't be taught like geometry. I can only nudge you on your way with questions."

"What questions?"

"How do you know we're in a mess?"

"Institutions we depend on aren't dependable."

"Good observation. Journalism, for instance, is broken and most people seem too complacent to notice or care. Humans tend to recognize patterns that are out of the ordinary. That suggests institutions charged to sharpen such skills aren't dependable either."

"How can a newspaper publisher like you think journalism is broken?"

"Contemporary journalism has circuit breakers that never seem to pop. Every day, articles get published and aired that fail the smell test."

"Press coverage sets a narrow depth of field on the lens of coverage. They dwell on the action in the foreground — milestones, trivia, artificial competitions, appearance versus reality, games, style—they record easy things at the expense of the important. Like a camera lens, their narrow depth of field leaves the background stubbornly out of focus, as if it did not matter."

"What goes out of focus?"

"Society is the background. A tapestry or rug is a useful analogy.

Cultures are like the pile in the carpet—so many different colors, varied in texture, fabric, thickness and length—but underneath it all, and holding it all together, are the crisscrossed warp and weft threads of society. A background brought in focus by the camera lens would draw attention to those necessary threads that underlie society. Such threads get overlooked if people are not inoculated by experience to recognize them.

"Here's another analogy. Leonardo da Vinci painted masterpieces on surfaces that undermined his great art. *The Last Supper*, painted in the 1490s on gesso that was subject to mold and flaking, was almost ruined within 100 years. Either Leonardo did not know or did not care about the quality of the background upon which he painted his masterpieces.

"Centuries later, we know better about quality background and know enough why we should care. So when I criticize great literature for the background on which it is painted, I do not diminish its genius, but I can wish for more.

"For instance, when cultures interact, they are treated as 'us' and 'them' and any underlying warp and weft of common social fabric that joins the two is overlooked. At the same time, journalists see themselves standing apart from cultures, as independent observers accountable only to themselves. Oblivious of any underlying fabric, journalism interacts, unsupervised and indifferent, absent guiding lights or yardsticks to measure its own misbehavior."

"What does that mean?"

"Necessarily, but indulgently unregulated, journalists wallow in the luxury of shallow work. They rationalize that any popularity they earn somehow implies they are good."

"I don't see why that matters."

"Precisely. We have become complacent. Educational institutions on which you depend only incidentally guide you to see what matters. If institutions can't get you out of the mess, you are resigned to understand only to the degree you can."

"That doesn't show me the way."

"Actually, it shows you the first step—that you are alone."

"Am I alone?"

"Even people when they are together are alone."

"Huh?"

"Each person is insular and unique, with his or her own history, obliged to make decisions from singular experience. You can never hug anyone close enough that they can make those decisions for you."

"Even if it's true, why is that significant.

"If you are alone, why manufacture society? What compelling reason can you deduce from experience why you should associate with others?

"Machiavelli would say that together we can conquer the world."

"Machiavelli wrote at a time when an iron box would protect your wealth and a barred door protect your family. Science has put such knowledge in the hands of anyone who cares to learn enough to use it. Machiavelli has become too risky."

"That leaves me alone and still without a plan."

Then set up a mind experiment to model circumstance. Set a scene where you are nowhere, alone, facing Mother Nature."

"You are going Zen on me."

"Seriously. It is worthwhile to discover that it is in society, rather than culture, that journalism has its place. We discussed the difference between society and culture."

"Cultures were the varied pile of the carpet and society the common threads holding them together."

"A culture shares traditions and experience. Society does not have to. Society is the edge at which any two individuals or any two cultures interact."

"Then society happens within cultures, across cultures, and apart from cultures."

"Yes, but within a culture how one interacts with another can be

determined by cultural mores or longstanding experience that mitigate the problem of how to behave."

"But absent those mores, how does one establish minimum standards of behavior between cultures, where there is no shared experience?"

"That, my friend, is up to you."

"I thought it was a fair question."

"I gave a fair answer. It *is* up to you. I can't discover the answer for you. No one else can either. You have to find the way yourself. But find your answer and you'll discover that the same sturdy way is what others invariably discover, too."

"You can't show me the way, but you can show me how to find the way for myself. And my way will invariably resemble your way? Color me skeptical. We're 2500 years into written history and such an answer has not been teased out by our institutions."

"The answer has been there for those who looked. But the answer is easier to see now that professional philosophers have done the heavy work pruning away unworkable alternatives. Professional philosophers historically reduced your choices to two. Plato and Aristotle proposed that universals exist as forms that are absolute and eternal. On another side, culturally based conventions like to form according to historical traditions and concepts handed down through shared religious experience. Universals have never been verified and the culturally-dependent solutions resign players to moral relativism and intercultural conflict that answers only to a Machiavellian play of power."

"Then how can it be up to me?"

"The early 1990s forced us to reexamine intercultural relations in an attempt to resolve the conflict between cultures in the Middle East. Was one culture merely extending colonial power against another or could one deduce an applicable standard of behavior to apply?"

"Traditions based in history or philosophy can't resolve those conflicts?"

"You can't guarantee that any stranger you attempt to deal with will accept premises based on anything other than his or her own experience."

"That makes me feel isolated and alone."

"You *are* alone. That's a good first step. Imagine that you are alone, adrift in a storm-tossed sea of life. Some time ago, philosophy tried to come to your aid and build a framework to bedrock at the bottom of the sea, but as Gödel and Wittgenstein discovered, that plan proved unworkable. Although that did not work and you are unable to touch bottom, you have options because you can see others, also alone and also adrift."

"If society is the edge at which any two individuals meet, you're trying to nudge me to manufacture society using only the tools of my own ingenuity."

"Correct, with the caveat that a precise philosopher would object because the rudiments of language are culturally dependent. But for the purposes of this mind experiment, we assume some ability to communicate is essential to society and the specific assignment is to fashion a workable solution in this environment, not establish perfection."

"So I can shout to others who are adrift?

"You *must* communicate with them. You are, after all, trying to lash people together to form society. Your options are limited, at the outset because what you can communicate must assume neither absolutes nor culturally based assumptions."

"I'm stumped."

"Outdated notions of citizenship accumulated over a lifetime can befuddle otherwise educated people. Citizenship's unexamined notions need to be jettisoned, at least temporarily, to build a sound foundation. Later, they can be dredged up to retrieve and mine for useful threads. There is enough experience each day—confirmed by the last century—to figure what is wrong, deduce what to do, and, from purely personal experience, understand why."

"I'm still stumped."

"I like the image of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, the 1832 woodcut by Katsushika Hokusai, where small boats are threatened by an unruly sea. How would they connect together, had they the necessity? How would modern boats do it?"

"Toss lines to each other?"

"Ever hear of a Lyle Gun?"

"No."

"A Lyle Gun on one ship can launch one end of a thin messenger line across a stormy sea to another ship. The ship receiving the messenger line would lash to it the end of a heavier line to be hauled back to the first ship. At each pass, a successively heavier line could be sent across until the ships were tightly lashed together."

"I understand the example. One thin thread tied to a larger line would build a successively more stable connection. But to establish society what would be the communication equivalent of a thin messenger line untainted by your culture?"

"Recall in your past an instance when you thought you were correct but were mistaken and painfully hurt by it."

"That is culturally dependent because it relies on experience."

"It would be culturally dependent if the question relied on *my* experience, but it does not. Show me what in the question is cultural? You think it's cultural because I ask about past experience, but I don't care what that past experience is."

"You are imposing your way."

"Not at all. Not my answer, but a process of your own discovery that may or may not yield my conclusion. I have simply nudged you to think for yourself."

"Why is what you say not merely opinion?"

"Because I am not expressing my point of view, but rather recommending a process by which people can see for themselves. Opinion as argument would say, 'I believe this, and therefore so should you.' There is quite a difference between an opinion and

a recipe that describes useful process. The particular experience recalled is irrelevant. In any lifetime, regardless of culture, there will invariably be such an experience."

"What will that recognition get you?"

"People recognize patterns from experience. The question suggests a pattern to consider that sometimes we *think* we are right not because we *are* right, but simply because we think we are right."

"Is that an important insight?"

"Pivotal. Essential. If your intellect works on a mental map of reality and not on reality itself, it is not necessarily accurate."

"Does that matter?"

"To be brought face-to-face with the fragility that the only tool you have to navigate through life, a humbling awareness that inaccurate perceptions create risk matters more than anything else in the world. An accurate mental map of reality becomes essential to minimize the possibility of future painful experiences."

"Isn't that a universal then? Isn't that absolute?

"Not at all. Simply because different experience invariably leads to the same conclusion does not suggest that the conclusion can be deduced with the unchallenged logic of a geometric theorem. We have not rediscovered Platonic forms. Each personal conclusion is based on individual experience. Each individual, each generation, has to revalidate the process and the result."

"Then what has been accomplished?"

"The incentive to associate with others springs from individual humility about how exposed we will be if we don't cooperate."

"This isn't very original."

"Originality isn't the issue; it's how the insight is applied that matters. Hobbes described life for the individual in the state of nature as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.' Scots philosopher Douglas Hume wrote significantly about doubt in the 1700s. John Stuart Mill believed free speech was required for

the same reason. Doubt and the humility that springs from doubt follow from each other. One who recognizes doubt becomes humble. Humility comes to those who recognize doubt. Rene Descartes ostensibly said, "I think therefore I am", but he was really saying "I doubt, therefore I am."

"The incentive to manufacture society leads to two threads:
• Processes that foster humility — which is the understanding that there may be a better way of doing things, and
• Reciprocity — which is the understanding that others can help us find that better way as much as we can help them."

"Why should I value humility and reciprocity?"

"If manufacturing society allows us to lift ourselves infinitesimally above the rest of the animal kingdom, it improves the odds of survival."

"Society as the creation of individuals would fly in the face of many philosophers and politicians who put the state first."

"Those who put the state first tend to be those who would benefit if the rest of us meekly acquiesce to reestablishing serfdom. 'For the good of the state' is an often unchallenged cliché that we just challenged."

"Your 'society' doesn't have much meat on its bones."

"Humility and reciprocity are the foundations from which to deduce morality."

"I thought morality was culturally dependent."

"That is yet another instance where we have one word that represents two flavors of behavior. Separate words do not exist to distinguish between culturally dependent morals passed down by tradition, and process concepts—morals deduced from humility and reciprocity, the minimal requirements for society."

"How do virtues map with process concepts?"

"Gosh, there are so many. Humility, of course, maps to humility, but so does forgiveness. Benevolence, compassion, generosity, gentleness, tolerance, justice, loyalty, and others map to reciprocity and a sense of otherness. Responsibility,

truthfulness, sensitivity, dependability, alertness, and sincerity all map to regard for the accuracy of one's mental map of reality. Contentment, initiative, joyfulness, patience, map to a sense of time and one's place in it. Other so-called virtues are skills like rhetoric or worthwhile habits like creativity, orderliness, or endurance.

"Other useful understandings are important to know but are not usually classified as virtues. Balance, consistency, and simplicity come with perspective. Understanding facades and what is possible deal with differentiating ideas versus self. Recursion and continuous re-evaluation are processes useful for problem solving.

"If I were to try to find a word to make a clear distinction, 'Character' label the morals deduced from humility and reciprocity. Character represents the processes one mind uses to decide how to act toward others. Small-p philosophy of Seneca was meant to be about how to deal with the simple problems of living. It addresses on a practical level, 'What can we know?', 'How should we act?', and "How should one deal with others?' As Socrates had to work within the limits of language with *polis*, we work within the limits of the word character as it is represented in literature, personality, virtue, and process."

"Character. I think I missed that course in school."

"Didn't we all."