



Chapter 1

Being Human

If we're going to try, as we suggested we would in the Introduction, to understand the term "art" as it's used to refer to this rather confusing idea in Western culture, we need first to establish that in fact "art" *does* refer to an idea. This seems a bit counterintuitive, for it generally seems pretty obvious that we use most words to refer directly to *things* that *are* what the word suggests.¹

But is that really the case? Imagine for a moment a single, specific, black-and-white cow, just standing in a field somewhere, being observed by three people – a dairy farmer, say, and a zoologist, and a member of a cult that happens to worship cattle. Now, each of those observers sees precisely the same cow, but they refer to it differently: the farmer is likely to call it a "Holstein," the scientist knows it as a "bovine," and the cultist sees it as a "god." So there are four words (including "cow"), at least, that can be used to point to the same specific phenomenon in the world, to that specific cow. They're not interchangeable, as you'll see if you try to say "It's time to milk the god," or "We must do what we can to behave as our Holstein would have us behave," while keeping a straight face. And they're all perfectly valid, though none of them change the fact of that cow itself, which is still just standing there in the field, as it was before anybody came along and started referring to it. Most words, then, refer to different *ideas* we have about aspects of the world, rather than referring in any essential way to those aspects themselves, or, for that matter, changing them any.

And "art" is no exception ... except that in the case of "art," there's a curious sort of reversal going on. Our cow is just standing



there, directly observable to any normally functioning person who might happen by, regardless of the diverse words such persons might use to describe it, what diverse ideas of it, that is, they might chance to have. “Art,” though, is only one word, and so presumably only describes one idea (however ill-defined, which of course is our issue here) ... but we can apply it to great numbers of diverse phenomena – indeed, to virtually anything at all. So, while I can’t, if I wish to make sense, call an oriental carpet a “cow,” I *can* call it “art.” Now, how does *that* work?

In the name of trying to figure out how *all* this works – and in the process, what the idea behind this odd word “art” might be – we’ll probably do well to review some basics about ideas and words per se. And here’s the *most* basic thing: both ideas and the words we use to express them have necessarily to do with the fact that we human beings are *self-conscious*. (I know, I know – everybody is, well ... *conscious* of that; but on the other hand, some days we’re more so than others, and in what follows here, we need to have it in the forefront.) That is, we humans experience ourselves, understand ourselves, describe ourselves, as *having* “selves,” as being essentially autonomous beings, existing as distinct from everything else. “There’s me,” we say, however subliminally, “and there’s ... all the rest of it.”

It *may* be, in fact, that we’re the only ones of whom this is so, and that accordingly it’s *the* – not just *a* – definitive human characteristic ... though in fact that seems less and less likely. For what it’s worth, the prevailing scientific view has long been that we humans do seem, at least, to be the only beings on earth of which this is true, with the possible exception of the whales and dolphins (research results on them are still pending). But there is also a considerable, and growing, amount of anecdotal evidence that suggests that this may not be the case, that other animals *do* exhibit varying degrees, at least, of self-awareness. Both of these positions have their avid defenders; nor is it necessary to our purposes here to decide this question one way or another, even if we could. Perhaps the simplest and safest way to describe the situation, then, is to note that, speaking strictly and carefully, we *know* that humans are aware of themselves, in their interactions with their environment(s), and that the Cetaceans *might* be ... but it seems most *likely* that no other animals (and almost certainly, no plants) are, *at least not to the same degree*.

And given that we are what *we* are, i.e., self-conscious, it is next to impossible for us to imagine what our experience of the world



would be like if we were *not*, if we were, that is, as the other animals have long been thought by the scientific community to be. It would certainly seem, though, that the most immediate difference between our experience of the world and (supposedly) theirs would be that without the “remove” that self-consciousness provides us, there would be no need for us to *have* ideas, to *think*, in the abstract, about anything ... for there would be no experience of anything to have ideas or think about.

Rather, in the absence of a sense of self, experience would presumably be of a kind of sensory continuum, of all-things-as-one-thing, in which everything would be *sensed* – one would feel pain, tickles, probably even elation or depression, and so on – but nothing would be *perceived*, as there would be no oppositions, no breaks in the sensed continuity of it all, *to* perceive (much less *conceive* ideas about). Presumably, everything in such a consciousness would just ... Be, and there would only be an endlessly shifting Now. (This is a hard idea to “get,” just because we *are* self-conscious.)

In such a coterminous relation with experience it would be possible, certainly, to learn more-or-less complicated patterns of pragmatic *reactions* to it – as, say, your Labrador retriever appears to do, and to a greater degree than does your guinea pig, not to mention your guppy – but there would be no *consciousness* of doing even that. And insofar as this characterization of consciousness other than our own may indeed be the case, for animals (and plants) other than ourselves, it suggests that, for better or for worse and to whatever degree, *they* live lives of *direct, unmediated* experience.

But we humans don't; indeed, we can't. Given our fundamental consciousness of “self” as distinguished from “other,” we look out *at* the world, as it were; and we see it as composed of perceptible distinctions that mimic that fundamental one of which we understand ourselves to be a part. Just as there's “us” and “other,” that is, there's also this and that, and these and those, making up our world. And so we humans *think*, about those distinctions we *perceive*, and then we express our ideas, what we *conceive*, about them. And we do that, of course, in language(s). Thus our human, *conscious* experience² is – in direct opposition (supposedly) to that of all the rest – *indirect*, and *mediated*.

Perhaps we should take a minute to be sure that that word “mediated” is clear. We're all at home lately with the idea of “the media” – radio, television, photography and film, the electronic media, and so



on; and we know too of “mediums” (in the original Latin, the plural of “medium” would be “media”), people who claim to be able to bring the spirits of the dead together with the living, for conversations. Mediums and the media are, if you think about it, essentially *interfaces*, that exist “in the middle,” between spirits and people, or between events that happened somewhere else at some other time, and audiences who want to know about them (and so, turn on the seven o’clock news).

Those people and those audiences would have no *awareness* of those spirits’ ideas or of those events without those interfaces, those intermediaries; and in the same way, humans have no *conscious* awareness of their experience, except through language. While that grizzly bear over there certainly “knows,” at some level, that you’re standing between him and that elk he was eating, he (presumably) doesn’t think it over as we do, and decide what to do about it; he just reacts, and charges. When we see him charging, though, while we may surely react instinctively to some degree, we *do* think, too, about what to do (“Should I go for that tree? Play dead? What?”), by our nature (and ideally, fast), and *then* we do it. And when we think, we’re describing the situation to ourselves, in *language*. Language exists “in the middle,” between our conscious experience and our reactions to it; hence our experience is “mediated,” in a way that the bear’s – or that of any other (supposedly) pre-linguistic species – presumably is not.

And it’s our nature, *as* humans, that this is so; just as beavers build dams, and flowers turn to the light, humans describe their experience. This idea of the “naturalness” of this “linguaging” that humans do is important here, and in the name of making it as clear as we can, let’s add now, to this fact of our self-consciousness, an impossibly cartoonish version of evolutionary theory – one that presents evolution as straightforward, simple, and fast (none of which, of course, it actually is).

If we consider those first two factors – our self-consciousness, and the apparent “naturalness” of it – in terms of this new silly one, we can imagine a scenario in which at some point, some time, some beastie would have been the first to evolve into this state of human self-consciousness. In truth, of course, it took a nearly infinite number of infinitesimal changes, over millennia, for this to happen. But in our cartoon version, some creature must have been the first, that is, to find itself looking around at the world, rather than just



participating in it, the first to recognize fully that – ohmigod – there’s “me,” and there’s ... Everything Else.

Thus faced with the chaos – for so it surely would have seemed – this newly self-conscious beastie (this proto-human, if you hadn’t seen that coming) would have had to try to “make sense” out of it all, if only in the name of sheer survival. And it would have done so by identifying aspects of that chaos that seemed to have something to do with *itself* (for it couldn’t possibly have dealt with it *all*, all at once) and then *relating* those perceived aspects, in ways that seemed to ... “make sense” – which only it could recognize. Then, on the basis of those perceived, now *conceived*, relationships, it would have proceeded, tentatively, augmenting and amending as necessary, as it went.

So, for instance (and to continue the silliness a little longer), our newly self-aware beastie might notice that sometimes, in hot, humid weather, the sky got really dark, and big jagged flashes of light came from it, accompanied by loud booms and rumbling noises ... and sometimes, some of those flashes hit the ground. And sometimes when they did, circles of hot, reddish-yellow, flickering substance moved outward along the ground; and the ground that it passed over turned black ... and when that happened, if you could find any bunnies in that blackened area, while they may have been sort of ... charred, still they didn’t run away like they usually did, and were much easier to chew. And pretty soon, if those things kept happening in that way, causal relationships would begin to be assumed by the beastie, who’d then proceed on the bases of those assumptions, at least until some experience came along to change its thinking about them, in which case, it would amend them accordingly.

As time went on, those tentative ideas, those tentative *descriptions of the world*, that did not need much augmenting or amending, would have begun to seem less and less tentative, more and more the way things essentially “were”; they would, that is, have morphed from hypotheses about how that beastie *supposed* the world *might be* understood, into established ideas of how it was *supposed to be* understood ... to which ideas, other ideas about it could then be related. “Okay,” our beastie might have thought to itself, “if I think about this thing in this way, then it only makes sense to think of that thing in that way ...,” and so on.

And eventually, when some other beastie crossed the evolutionary bridge into self-consciousness, rudimentary language would have



been developed, as a way of passing along these apparent understandings in the abstract. If you wanted to explain what you knew about thunderstorms, for instance, but the weather wasn't such that there were any around to point to, you needed to find a way to refer to them. And in time, via the same process, metalanguage – basically, language that's used to talk about language – would have been developed too, so that you could refer to the language which was now understood as part of things over here on this side – as in “Oh yeah, and we've developed this thing called ‘language’ – see? I'm using it now.”

And as the philosopher Suzanne Langer,³ among others, has noted, so it has presumably gone, for us humans – that's just what we've all been doing, she suggests – ever since. Just as did the beastie(s) in this admittedly silly but perhaps not fundamentally misleading scenario, we humans have been thus *describing* the ideas we have about how the world seems to make sense, and sharing those descriptions, via language, since we *became* humans. We spend our time perceiving the chaos, beholding our experience of the world ... and then trying to order that experience, by conceiving ideas about it, and *relating* them in ways that seem to make sense. And then we “relate” it again – this time in the sense of *describing* what we've conceived – to ourselves and/or to others, using language.

It may be difficult at first to think of ourselves in this way, because by now, so much of the world has *been* described, long since, and these descriptions have been presented to us as the way things “are” – as, for instance, the idea that there *is* “art.” There's no sense of having figured these things out by ourselves, based on our own experience and speculation. But though we may thus be passive receivers much of the time, we still do “buy in” to those descriptions at some level, and then, one hopes (for this is how human progress happens) add our own ideas of how we think they might be somewhat adjusted to better effect. This is, indeed, the human condition ... or at least, it's one way of *describing* it.

And if this brief chapter has served to present the first aspect of that condition – the beholding and conceiving and relating part – Chapter 5 will talk a bit more about the second, i.e., language. First, though, we'll look in the next three chapters at how this idea of “art” has evolved and manifested itself, from its roots in Western culture, until now.



Notes

- 1 Most languages include *some* words, which we might refer to as “function words,” which don’t refer to much of anything, on their own, but instead serve just to make the language work as it does ... articles (like “the,” or “a”), conjunctions (like “and,” or “but”), and so on.
- 2 We humans surely have kinds of awareness and ways of knowing that are *not* conscious, too ... intuition, deep emotional responses, understandings of the world held so long as to have become virtually instinctive, and so on. But our *conscious* functions are our primary concern here.
- 3 Langer, Suzanne K., *Philosophy in a New Key*. Cambridge, Harvard, 1957.

