Episode 7-The Arts

The Scope of the Arts

Today, we want to look at the art through the lens of ToK. It is difficult to define what we mean by the arts. It seems to be a very inclusive term that embraces the world, people, morality, and religious beliefs. And we found previously it overlaps with other areas such as mathematics, with their common interests in symmetry, asymmetry, and structure. So the question is, "is there a set of specific content unique to the arts?" Well, in a particular context, the answer would be yes. For example, there are specific techniques and rules to painting. But in terms of the arts as a whole, the arts represent or convey a multitude of thoughts and issues, but not a specific set of ideas. This means that while they do pose knowledge questions, the knowledge questions are not unique or of a distinct type. They are the sort we could ask in any area of knowledge. Well, if there is not a specific definition of the arts or a specific subject matter, can we characterize art by its contribution to our knowledge as a whole? The arts do play a crucial role by contributing to our pleasure, awareness or understanding of topics as well as our enjoyment of beauty. Well, then, this is our starting point, that the arts produce an important type of knowledge and we therefore want to investigate what we know about art.

The Ways of Knowing in the Arts:

Our introductory overview yielded an ambiguous conception of the arts, and perhaps we would do better by considering the ways of knowing involved in art. Again, the arts are hard to pin down because they seem to use all ways of knowing. We also want to be aware that reason, often neglected in this area of knowledge, can be a key component in understanding the arts. So the arts are not only just about imagination, intuition and emotion. Literature provides an excellent example, as we use reason to try to understand the motivation of an author or the characters that they create. Also, we will not learn much about music without investigating its structure, again using reason as our guide. Not only is it difficult to pinpoint a specific content for the arts, or a specific set of knowledge issues, it is difficult narrow down its use of ways of knowing. This issue also highlights what is unique about the arts in comparison to most areas of knowledge, because it seems to be all inclusive. Perhaps another way of getting a more definitive view of the arts is by looking at the issue of how knowledge is produced in the arts.

<u>Producing Knowledge in the Arts</u>:

We may begin by distinguishing between creating art (personal knowledge) and the evaluation of that creation by others (shared knowledge). We can identify three levels of aesthetic experience. The first is the aim or view of the artist, and it is an example of personal knowledge. However, there also seems to be a second aspect of this experience--the reaction of a viewer or reader or audience member. It focuses on how you react to the work of art-if you like it, whether it moves you. And this is not purely personal knowledge because it occurs at the intersection of what the artist presents and what the individual audience member experiences. We may refer to this as a "***zone of exchange***." But inevitably, the experience does not stop there for a number of reasons. People go on to discuss the artwork and it passes into shared knowledge. This discussion brings with it critical tools that in some sense attempt to evaluate the meaning, its value. Here we cross over into the realm of shared knowledge.

The complexity and interplay of personal knowledge, the zone of exchange and shared information can perhaps be better understood using the art form of dance as an example of this interchange between personal and shared knowledge. Personal and the "zone of exchange" intersect when a choreographer is also a dancer in the performance. The personal knowledge aspect is the physical exploration of the topic through movement. However, the role of the dancer is to take the structure presented by the choreographer and bring it to light, which seems to be both a blending of personal knowledge, that of the individual choreographer and the dancer, but also a zone of exchange where the dancer applies his knowledge to the structure provided by the choreographer. The artwork is then transformed in this exchange and has already a sort of shared knowledge. What then, of the third part of this triad? The idea of shared knowledge in the form of evaluating a dance performance? It would seem that evaluation is applying a different set of perspectives to a performance. It can bring out new meanings, but it can also force the performance into a pre-determined pattern and miss its creativity. The result of evaluation can be helpful and liberating. Or it could simply create a new orthodoxy for judging art. The critic can be helpful or destructive to the creative process, but it is potentially a valuable new voice or perspective. Some conclusions that we might draw from this example. Well, first, when people claim that art is purely subjective, what they're really referring to are the first two levels we've describe--the personal knowledge of the artist and the zone of exchange and the subsequent reaction of the work of art by the audience. But is that all there is to art? Are

we utterly incapable of making non subjective evaluations about art? Well, if the answer is "yes'" Then all art is subjective.

If this is the case, then we are stuck with the "John Wayne theory of art." This is from a movie reference. John Wayne was an American actor who specialized in Westerns in the 1950s and 60s. And in one movie there is a scene where he walks into the saloon and sees a large painting of a semi-nude woman over the bar. Wayne turns to his sidekick (because cowboys always have sidekicks) and says, "I don't know if it's art, but I like it." So in this instance, art is just simply subjective-- what you like. However, if the answer to this is "no," that it is not purely subjective, then we need to inquire whether and to what extent it's possible to formulate non-subjective rules for your evaluating an aesthetic experience. So far we have gone from personal knowledge to shared knowledge and have established the possibility that shared knowledge may contain a set of criterion by which we may better understand art. Accordingly, we will now turn our attention to a consideration of to what degree there is a method in the arts.

Is There A Method to the Arts?:

Well, first of all, we have to note there is a widespread resistance to critical analysis in the arts. Just as Oscar Wilde said in his famous quote, “there are two ways to dislike art. One is dislike it, and the other is to like it *rationally*.” However "critical" does not have to be defined as tearing something apart to analyze it. Being critical could also mean having specialized knowledge or background knowledge that allows one to understand it better. Every other area of knowledge requires this. So why not the arts? It can lead to something positive, a deeper appreciation of works of art and perhaps an understanding of where they do and do not work. Perhaps the method of evaluating the arts can be seen as gaining a fluency that permits a greater understanding of the expression, rather than any sort of objective evaluation. Perhaps all of the stuff that interests us in artistic expression could be seen as “informed opinion.” The informed opinion viewpoint argues that there are standards in art because we find something important there that we think others should share and that they should care about. Now, in order to learn what this is, we much dig a bit deeper and get background information and also learn what informed people in the field think.

Methods for Developing Informed Opinion:

In what follows we will examine four methods for developing informed opinion.

Method One: Knowledge Questions.

To understand art as a way of knowing, we should consider first knowledge questions. What sort of things might we be interested in examining in the arts? One response is the things they have in common. To what degree do they work the same way? How bound to historical or cultural context is a work of art? And how much can we safely generalize from such instances when art is non-representational, that is does not represent reality as we know it? How do we generalize from a specific case? Is there progress in the arts? Do they build on the past works of art? Do works of art make knowledge claims? According to what criteria do we value the arts? How is this affected by the critical perspectives drawn from knowledge in the field?

Method Two: Examination of Diversity and Subjectivity.

The second method is to examine the diversity and subjectivity because no other field shows such diversity and inclusiveness in terms of subject matter, variety of forms, engagement in all ways of knowing, and its ability to play multiple roles in our lives. In addition to diversity, there is an abundance of different perspective works of art, and our appreciation of them are infused with the perspectives that we bring to the experience. An interesting feature of these perspectives is that none of them proves the other false. This means that we don't juxtapose one school of art to another to determine which one is right, as we might do in other areas of knowledge. One way to sort all this diversity out is to admit once we look at a particular example of the arts our general knowledge issues give way to social and historical context. It would seem that we cannot understand or evaluate a given work of art without grasping its context. To recap, we can examine knowledge issues to see what they all have in common, but it seem that that does not tell us all that much about a given work of art. In that sense, knowledge issues can only take us so far in understanding the meaning of artistic expression. Perhaps this is because such an approach is in fact far too objective and therefore less appropriate. So when we try to learn more background information or we want to make a critical evaluation, it may be of a different type. It may be subjective. Let us redefine subjective. It does not mean purely arbitrary or simply a matter of preference, but rather that we use background and informed opinion to better understand and appreciate a work of art. This is not unknown in other areas of knowledge. It is *Verstehen* or meaning approach discussed in the human sciences. We rely on informed

opinion and background information to understand the experience as it is lived, not to evaluate or test empirically.

Method Three: Common Characterisitics

We now come to a third method common characteristics. The first two methods we employed--understanding knowledge issues and examining diversity and subjectivity--yielded informed opinion to a point. It allows us to clarify our own reactions to works of art. But now we would like to go a step further and inquire whether once art passes into shared knowledge, does it provide standards that help us better understand art as an area of knowledge? In essence, the study of knowledge questions and the diversity subjectivity issue helps us separate the purely subjective from the subjective that is worth studying , the "real "art. What are the features of genuine art? Well, it seems it creates something accessible to the senses. It aims to deliberately shape the human experience. With the materials and the medium it chooses through its aesthetic choices, the arts communicate something to their audience, a purpose set within a perspective. Finally, the arts use all three aspects of human subjectivity, imagination, creativity and aesthetic judgment, as well as our capacity to communicate.

Method Four: The General and the Particular

A fourth method to better understand the arts is by considering the general and the particular. One way of understanding the notion of a subjectivity that is nevertheless shared knowledge is by comparing the arts to a more sequential disciplines such as science. Art and science differ in the relationship of the particular to the general. They are similar in that the work of individuals inspires new ways of thinking about the world, new ways of seeing things. However, how they do this is different in science. Individual work fuses into shared knowledge and becomes universal. The work of individuals is blended with others to present new objective views of experience. Others can accept or disprove or modify it, but they are dealing with an impersonal and objective body of knowledge in the arts. Individual work does not lose its particularity. Pieces of art never converge to a common goal that can be achieved by linking them together. Objective measures are irrelevant. "More accurate" is not a term that applies in the arts. They do not build upon one another cumulatively--new expressions take their place alongside old ones. They do not supersede them. This examination of the general and particular suggests the degree to which we can make generalizations about art, and apply generalizations to a particular work of art. We

can look at genres and deduce tendencies within that genre which serve as more or less accurate generalizations. We can then apply that general knowledge to the individual expression to see if that tells us more about a work of art. When art is generalizing about the human experience, it works the other way around as well. An artist may generalize about the human experience. In both cases, we seem to need informed opinion and background knowledge to determine whether we should accept the claims about a particular work of art that comes from our generalization or the generalizations that come from a particular work.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we have examined the arts and attempted to learn how might we be able to evaluate or at least better understand them. But perhaps the best reason for examining art as an area of knowledge is offered by the art critic Ted Cohen. He writes, "I am trying to understand why I or anyone for that matter, would ever seriously care to deny or assert that something is art. I have gotten this far--when I feel like insisting or denying that something is art, it is because I wish to insist on or resist the idea that the thing is to be taken seriously, that there is a kind of obligation to recognize the thing as a significant item in my life. And I've gotten this much further--to explain the significance of the thing in my life. I must have posited it also has a place or deserves to have a place in the lives of others. That's as far as I've gotten."

Thank you for listening to this podcast.