

C R I T I Q U E



THE ARTS

Issue 6

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CRITIQUE



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ISSUE 6: THE ARTS

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Cover design by **Emma Robinson**

INTRODUCTION

Wittgenstein once commented that “People nowadays think, scientists are there to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to entertain them. *That the latter have something to teach them – that never occurs to them.*” This seems especially pertinent to bear in mind when we consider the drastic cuts that have affected arts and humanities subjects across the country in the past year; the authority we give to the sciences seems to have come at the cost of devaluing the arts. The cognitive value of the arts is something philosophers have struggled to define, but I remain certain that there are things to be learnt about human nature from reading, say, Milan Kundera, which the biological or physical sciences just cannot express. In this issue, the dialectic of the arts and the sciences is explored further in the essays by Sam Dennis and Edward Tout, with the ideas of a standard of taste and the death of the author being explored in turn by Jack Lever. Finally, in tribute to the expression of the artist, there is a short creative piece detailing the struggle of the artist with their place in the world by Ettie Holland.

For further reading:

Midgley, Mary (2003) *Science and Poetry*, Routledge

Nicholls, Shaun (2006) *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretence, Possibility, and Fiction*, Oxford University Press

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1980) *Culture and Value*, Basil Blackwell

Rhiannon Bull
Editor

ECONOMICS IS AN ART, NOT A SCIENCE

Edward Tout

In this essay, Edward Tout examines the demarcation of the arts and the sciences, questioning the traditional classification of Economics as a science.

The title of this article should rightly cause anxiety in members of both the economics and the arts communities. Economics has for many years sought to justify itself by its use of complex mathematical equations and pseudo-scientific theories; to consider it a 'humanities subject' is tantamount to an admission of reduced status. I wish to argue in this article that the current crisis of self-confidence within economics is due to this inconvenient truth, but that an economist should be more than a mathematician with an extended vocabulary.

There are three main arguments for considering economics to be a science:

1. It uses mathematical equations to form theories which can be presented graphically.
2. It can use statistics to quantify risk and predict the future.
3. It uses objective empirical data to test these occurrences, and can model real-life economic relationships.

The problem with the first argument is that the basic assumptions on which many economic theories are based are *philosophical*, having as much to do with the author's impression of human behaviour as objective fact. Any theory of consumer behaviour, for example, rests

on assumptions made about the psychology of the consumer and the amount of information they have available to them. One is a 'neo-classicist' if one believes that consumers have perfectly rational expectations (in that they use all of the available information in their decisions), whereas one is a 'Keynesian' if one postulates that consumers have reactive expectations (informed by events) and act according to uncertainty. Because both of these theories are legitimate, they create competing theories of economics; hence why the academic community in economics is much more divided than those in the natural sciences.

There are also problems with econometrics, the statistical process used by economists to prove their theories. Most econometric models use Bayesian probability models, meaning that they assume that future events can be accurately predicted by someone who has all past and present information. Once again we hit an epistemological wall – how much do we really know about the working of the market? Are we inclined to view favourable information with keener eyes than negative information, or vice versa, depending on our unrelated mood? Furthermore, uncertainty and randomness

increases at an exponential rate as time progresses – meaning that the far future remains all but unknowable. The Efficient Markets Hypothesis declared that financial markets were perfectly capable of pricing risk – and the mistake of economics was not to challenge this theory simply because it was consistent in mathematical, if not literal, terms.

Although it is true that economics uses empirical analysis, this fact alone does not necessitate that it should be considered a science; after all, history, geography and politics are all empirical arts, are they not? The idea that one can objectively test economic variables in a laboratory scenario the same way that one might do in chemistry is fundamentally flawed – there is no laboratory for economics, and one can prove anything one wants by selectively pruning various data sets and setting them up in graphs (see the Spirit Level). Economics strives, like all sciences, towards the objective truth, but its progress is routinely shattered by unexpected economic collapses along the way.

How, then, do we get around the existential issues of economics? By reaffirming its basic characteristics. Firstly, economics is a *moral science*

in that it is concerned with the beliefs and views of human beings, and secondly it is a *normative science* in that it instructs us on how to act in given situations. The primary goal of economics should be to redefine its view of the limits of human understanding. For too long the assumptions of economics have been treated as universal axioms when a more nuanced approach is required. Any revision of views has been stymied by the fact that economics seeks to be to the social sciences what physics is to the natural sciences. The recent financial crash has led to a humbling of that pride, but as yet there has been no substantial change in the way that economics is taught.

Being a moral science, any student of economics must have a knowledge of both ethics and psychology. An economic theory cannot help but make assumptions about human goals and capabilities, yet, at degree level, one is currently unable to explore these avenues in single honours economics. There is a lack of emphasis on fact that the acceptance of any economic theory is reliant on its comparison with practical conventions and behaviour in society. A model which is internally consistent remains fairly useless if it is not also *externally* consistent; ethical, religious and even

romantic motives sit side by side with the will towards efficiency, yet are seldom considered when predicting how choices will be made. Otherwise, one might be left scratching one's head as to why pork merchants seem to struggle to sell in predominantly Islamic markets.

As a normative science, economics makes itself a guide to consumers, firms and policy-makers in government. When deciding how to act in a given situation, the context is always important – the correct action will be specific to that situation more than one according to a general principle. If an economist knows nothing of the history, politics, geography, or even anthropology of those whom it would advise, it is about as much use as a chocolate teapot. How can one talk about the development of China without some knowledge of the history and workings of the Chinese Communist party? Without taking such considerations into account, economics lacks authority.

I hope that economists will find this an optimistic article and welcome any defence of the mathematics which many prize. However, I believe that an economist must be an artist, who has as much intuitive skill as s/he has scientific.

WHY THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR IS A CONDITION FOR THE BIRTH OF THE READER

Jack Lever

Jack Lever here provides an analysis of Barthes' famous claim that the birth of the reader must be preceded by the death of the author.

In his essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes claims that the era of a literature tyrannically centred on what he calls the "God Author" is ending. The reader must no longer look to the Author for meaning, purpose and reason; instead, the multiplicity of cultures which constitutes the text is to be focused in the reader. From this Barthes concludes that it is only through the death of the Author that the reader can be truly born. In this short essay I shall try to make sense of what Barthes means by this claim and briefly explore a possible challenge.

The death of the Author in

Barthes' account can, I think, be understood as a historical, a conceptual and a literary claim. Historically, according to Barthes, the Author has never really existed; rather, the Author's voice is a composite unity of voices. In the opening of his essay, Barthes references the writer Balzac speaking of a character in his novel *Sarrasine*. Who, asks Barthes, did this voice belong to? Was it Balzac the individual? Balzac the author? Universal wisdom? Romantic Psychology? If the author is an occurrence consisting in the synthesis of a plurality of cultures and happenings, then it is useless to look to him as a means of deciphering

the writing. Yet since, and because of, the rise of the individualism that emerged from the Reformation, the Author has been looked to as an omniscient God-like individual who holds all the keys to the text.

Barthes claims that, historically, writers such as Mallarme, Valery and Proust first began to challenge this view. This is a historical point, as the Author here begins to be a historical conception that is becoming dated. Conceptually, Barthes is claiming, I think, that the notion of the Author is incoherent. And finally, Barthes' literary claim is that the modern writer must acknowledge the importance of the reader in the completion of his work. Barthes does not outline this implications of this in *The Death of the Author*, but I will return to this idea later in this essay through linking this to Narcissistic Literature.

Granted that the death of the Author can be understood in these three different ways, how then should the birth of the reader be understood? It cannot mean merely that the reader be understood as essential to the completion of a work of literature; by Barthes' own admission, this has *always*

been the case. Barthes claims that the reader is now the one person who 'holds gathered into a single field all the paths of which the text is constituted'. But again, this cannot be what is meant by the birth of the reader: for if this is true it has always been true even before the alleged death of the Author. Perhaps Barthes is claiming that literary criticism should not look to the Author in its attempts to understand and decipher the text. This would certainly follow from his essay but it seems unlikely that this is all that is meant. Rather, I think the birth of the reader should be understood as designating a new role for the writer. The writer should not view himself as presenting an omniscient picture of objective reality, but should rather be providing the materials with which the reader can himself take on the role of writer and completer of the project.

A possible objection is that the birth of the reader is possible without the death of the author. In *Narcissistic Narrative* Linda Hutcheon defends Narcissistic Literature as recognising the reader by giving him the role of reader, writer and critic.¹ What is Narcissistic Literature? Narcissistic writ-

¹ Hutcheon, Linda (1984) *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Methuen, pp: 138-153

ers make the process by which the reader is a function implicit in the text self-conscious. The reader is constantly challenged and made demands of. He is often unsettled and forced to scrutinize concepts of art and life values. By this process he is freed from conventional ways of thinking. The theory is part of the story rather than about it. Without doubt, this kind of writing acknowledges the birth of the reader.

However, the Author also seems necessary to this kind of writing; the Author lets the reader open up the work, but within limits that are created by the novelist. The Author is still necessary as a guide. So is this a counter-example to the central claim of Barthes' essay? Not quite.

Recall that Barthes' declaration that the Author has died is not the claim that the Author's function has ceased to be necessary. The death of the Author means the end of literary criticism which consists in looking to the biography and psychology of the Author, as well as a style of writing that gives the reader the role of writer and critic. If the writer has an identity, he has (consciously or unconsciously) an agenda, thereby validating the traditional aims of literary criticism and not endorsing the agenda of the read-

er. Hence, Hutcheon's essay does endorse the birth of the reader, but as Barthes predicted, this is done at the expense of the Author

Thus, the death of the Author is a condition for the birth of the reader: it is only by abolishing the identity of the Author that the reader can be recognised as having the creative function that he is entitled to. This is not the claim that there is no longer any need for an author; rather it is the claim that the reader is an integral part of the meaning of the text, and for that reason traditional literary criticism is doomed to failure.

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IS IT POSSIBLE TO DEFEND A STANDARD OF TASTE?

Jack Lever

We encounter a problem in aesthetics in trying to hold that one work of art can be “better” than another; Jack Lever here analyses Hume’s account of how we can hold that there is a “standard of taste”.

A standard of taste requires that there be some property of “art” in virtue of which we, or some human being(s), can rank some proportion of artworks against each other. It does not require that all people be capable of ranking artworks and it does not require that every single piece of art can be placed on a yardstick of artistic worth. In this essay I aim to defend the view that the value of a piece of art can usually be determined by the extent to which it can potentially contribute to the happiness or welfare of the perceiver. Furthermore, I intend to argue, that contrary to his critics, Hume is right to identify prejudice as an impediment to artistic appreciation.

I open with a summary of David Hume’s *Of the Standard of Taste*, as it admirably defends the notion of a standard of taste. Hume argues that beauty is not a property independent of human beings that can be discovered in a piece of art, but that it is a product of the relationship between the observer and the observed. When we look at something beautiful, the sentiment of beauty is felt by us the observer; it does not have an independent existence. However, in order for us to feel the sentiment of beauty there must be something within the artwork with a disposition to cause that sentiment. This can be clarified by employing the analogy (used by Hume) of seeing

red.¹ This qualitative experience does not belong in the object, but only in the man who perceives the object. Nonetheless, the experience of seeing red does tell us something about the object: it tells us that the object has a disposition which causes us to perceive it in a certain way, in this case as being red.

Just as the qualitative experience of seeing red requires the removal of impediments between the man and the object, so also must impediments be removed between a critic and an artwork in order to fully experience the beauty of a given piece of art. Hume lists five impediments: prejudice, lack of discrimination in judgement, lack of means-end reasoning required to understand the piece of art, lack of comparative judgement and lack of practice.² If these are removed, then a man may be described as a competent judge and he can legitimately ascertain the comparative worth of a majority of pieces of art.

The problem for Hume, however, is that the comparison with 'seeing red' is actually a misleading analogy. With regard to red objects, there is some

correspondence between an objective description and a subjective description. A scientist can check whether an object is giving off the wavelength of light we describe as 'red light'. With regard to beauty, however, it seems impossible that we could check in any objective fashion whether beauty actually exists in the object. Therefore, we have only the sentiment of the perceiver with which to judge the existence of beauty in the object. So Hume needs to argue that the five impediments are actually impediments to artistic value. It is not enough to infer that they prevent us seeing clearly, for it has already been ascertained that experiencing beauty is not a sort of seeing; there is nothing in the object to see.

Hume attempts to defend the five characteristics of a competent judge on independent grounds. He argues that there are paradigms of excellence, and it is an appreciation of these paradigms of excellence which is the mark of a competent judge.³ History is marked by a selection of great writers such as Homer whose appeal has endured across shifts of culture, geography,

¹ Analogy from Zangwill, Nick (2001) *The Metaphysics of Beauty*, Cornell University Press, p. 153

² Hume, David (1757) *Four Dissertations*, (Printed for A, Miller), pp.220-7

³ Hume, op. cit., p. 231

history, ideology and morality.⁴ A love of these works expresses the fact that prejudice is not an impediment to one's judgement.

Some commentators have attacked Hume on the basis that prejudice, rather than an impediment, is what enables us to *enjoy* certain genres of art.⁵ Some commentators have attacked Hume on the basis that prejudice, rather than an impediment, is what enables us to enjoy certain genres of art.⁵ How might Hume be defended against this criticism? When Hume uses the word 'prejudice' he does not use it to mean a set of assumptions about the world and man's relationship to it. Christianity is not a 'prejudice' but a world viewpoint. When Hume talks of the necessity of the ideal judge having a 'mind free from all *prejudice*'⁶ he is not suggesting that a piece of art should be contemplated from some neutral standpoint. Prejudice, for Hume, means the inability to step outside of one's own viewpoint and sympathise with somebody else's. If I have a prejudice against Christianity, it does not mean simply that I do not share a Christian viewpoint, but that I am not prepared to step into

the shoes of a Christian and view the world as he views it. Clearly, this is an impediment to the appreciation of art.

A standard of taste can be defended along Humean lines. The value of a work of art is a function of the extent to which it contributes to the welfare of the observer in the absence of impediments. One of these impediments is prejudice; however this must be interpreted in the Humean sense outlined above if it is to overcome the criticisms of certain commentators. There is an independent way to identify impediments, and this is the extent to which they prevent us from appreciating widely accepted paradigms of excellence.

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⁴ Hume, op. cit., p. 213

⁵ See, for example, Kieran, Matthew, 'Why Ideal Critics Are Not Ideal: Aesthetic Character, Motivation & Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 48, No. 3

⁶ Hume, op. cit., p. 224

HUME AND FEYERABEND ON THE ART OF SCIENCE

Sam Dennis

In this essay, Sam Dennis proposes a similarity between the philosophies of Paul Feyerabend and David Hume in relation to their work on science and the arts.

Key: EHU = *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, SOT = *Standard of Taste*, ORA = *Of Refinement in the Arts*, THN = *Treatise of Human Nature*; AM = *Against Method* (4th edition), COA = *Conquest of Abundance*

In what follows I argue that there are surprising affinities between the attitudes to science in the work of Paul Feyerabend and David Hume concerning scientific practice and science's claim to absolute truth. For each, the limits of humanity's relationship to reality and the liberty granted by our imaginative faculties preclude the plausibility of any absolutist or authoritarian scientific image. For both Hume and Feyerabend, man is a unique and insoluble admixture of determinable possibilities, affected by his situation and ability,

and relative to his place within society and within nature. As with art, science is a mode of experiential exploration and, moreover, one that is crucial to human flourishing. Though an unlikely pairing at first glance, both attempt to assimilate our epistemic standpoint with regards to, or at least blur the boundaries between, science and the arts. Three points of comparison are discussed: first, the holistic character of human nature; second, perspectival constraints imposed by Man's place within Nature; and thirdly, the shared normativity

between science and art.

Human existence, says Hume in the *Enquiry*, is a tripartite affair. Man is 'reasonable', 'social' and 'active'. Although Hume draws these distinctions, he does not mean to imply divisibility. Nor that these three aspects of humanity are entirely discrete. Rather, he stresses their interdependence, that is, the ineliminability of any two traits to the isolation of the third. We find an exact parallel in one of Hume's essays, whereby "industry, knowledge and humanity, are linked together, by an indissoluble chain" (ORA: 169-170). The conclusion that Hume draws from this view of human nature is that in science, as in the arts, the 'human element' cannot be abstracted from any putative epistemic model.

Hume, in a wonderfully 18th century understatement, describes the codification of knowledge through science and philosophy as a series of "polite letters [that] are nothing but pictures of human life in various attitudes and situations" (EHU: 9). This is both a holistic claim, as in the previous paragraph, and one which highlights the constraints on our perspective as individuals; that is, there can be no 'view from nowhere' (to borrow from Nagel, 1986).

Set within an epistemology whereby the philosophy of action plays a central role (actions being the only "original facts and realities, complete in themselves" THN: 458), Hume is rapidly led to the normative implications of this view of knowledge-acquisition, calling us to "let your science be human, and as such as may have a direct reference to action and society" (EHU: 9). In short, the rationality that accords our superiority over the animal kingdom (THN: 273), is the very same from which moral obligation arises. Reason cannot exist in a bubble.

Now, to the indomitable Paul K. Feyerabend. Just as with Hume's "polite letters" written from a particular epistemic standpoint, for Feyerabend "neither science nor rationality are universal measures of excellence, they are particular traditions" (AM: 223). And from where do these epistemic traditions arise? From poking and prodding nature in different ways- with different tools and a diversity of theoretical perspectives. Shirking the decorum of Hume, Feyerabend writes that "unmethodical foreplay thus turns out to be an unavoidable precondition of clarity and of empirical success" (AM: 18). Certainly, there is something of the artistic here and, in fact,

we find a perfect mirror of this expressed in Hume's aesthetics, whereby "all the general rules of art are founded only on experience, and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature" (SOT: 138)

However, whereas for Hume the situational, empirical aspect of any work of science or art remains thoroughly epistemological, Feyerabend treats such perspectives metaphysically (though I use this classification with some trepidation). The holistic view of man's relationship to nature grounds Feyerabend's metaphysics of abundance, the basic premise of which is that "being approached in different ways Nature gives different responses" (COA: 239). The diversity to be found in nature does not, for Feyerabend, warrant the atomisation of the abundance surrounding us. Rather, returning to epistemology, "intellectual generalizations around "art," "nature," or "science" are simplifying devices that can help us order the abundance around us." (COA: 223).

Taking stock, somewhat, we can say that perhaps the most important conclusion shared by Feyerabend and Hume- the one most often overlooked, I think- is that 'progress', occupying a distinctively human

area where the normative and the epistemological meet, is a sui generis notion, with a plurality of manifestations across art, science and morality. Thus, there is no independent thing, 'scientific progress', or 'artistic progression', tout court; they are both only aspects of something more significant, which both Hume and Feyerabend saw as the starting point for all philosophy. That is, a rich empiricism rooted in the exploration and elucidation of the 'humanitarian outlook', to which the realm of intellect is ultimately subservient. Thus, whilst science does indeed offer our best insight into reality, this is true only insofar as "real" is what plays an important role in the kind of life one wants to live." (COA: 248)

This is not such a grand claim as it may sound. For both Hume and Feyerabend, Man is principally an epistemological beach-comber. We are collectors of experience, of positive sentiment and of each other (via sympathy in Hume's case; anarchy in Feyerabend's). Both philosophers contrast the natural, in the sense of the mysterious world outside of human experience, with the artificial (THN: 13, 170; COA: 232). Philosophy and science, as much as art, are subsumed under the latter. Science, then, is not the

act of uncovering Nature's true face, but of making Nature an artefact, and thereby something we can collect and own.

This is manifest in the two distinctively normative claims with which I will end. Feyerabend tells us that "Empiricism [...] demands that the empirical content of whatever knowledge we possess be increased by as much as possible" (AM: 22). Comparably, Hume writes with all the promise of the Enlightenment that "the sweetest and most inoffensive path of life leads through the avenues of science and learning [...] to bring light from obscurity, by whatever labour must needs be delightful and rejoicing." (EHU: 11). In both instances, science and art are at the behest of virtue. Intellectual virtue, yes, but more generally, the most basic notion of human flourishing- the feeling that our lives are going well.

The above collage of quotations and analogy is not watertight; there are many points at which Hume and Feyerabend fundamentally disagree or diverge. What I hope to have demonstrated, however, is that there is something worth comparing between the two, and that each can shed light on the other without recourse to anachronism.

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THE ARTIST

Ettie Holland

Ettie Holland takes a creative approach to trying to establish the place of the artist in the world.

Nothing speaks of loneliness like the sound of distant laughter, rising over you and penetrating the walls of silence you've built around yourself. A thick sound, remote, but with a chord of intimacy that strikes deep within your heart, a reminder of everything you are not, everything you can't be, everything you've tried to be. A resonant sound, the echoes of which refuse to fade, a stubborn dismissal of your hasty retreat back into the depths of yourself. And so we turn to Art.

Writing requires, firstly and crucially, a painful awareness of your own consciousness. It is only once you have pared back your Self, stripped away the artifices bestowed upon your spirit by your perception of the gaze of others upon you, that you can Be. That we can

discover ourselves through the eyes of others is no more than a well maintained illusion: true understanding of the Self rests upon introspection, painful displacement from everything and everyone where you once hoped to belong. The Artist is, above all, to be lonely.

Art exists in the paradoxical realm in which sullen despair is married with intoxicating ecstasy; polar opposites embracing one another for a fleeting dance, two cumbersome partners becoming more than their combined worth in an impossible moment of heady achievement. We must first become nothing, and then we are permitted to build. Without the pain of Art, life is reduced to an ornate costume, borrowed and maintained over the years from the dressing-

up box of social expectation. Content oblivion obscures the creaking seams, the slightly worn knees, the colour that almost but doesn't quite suit. The Artist must shed these trappings and learn for themselves the trade of the seamstress, constructing a sheath that encompasses all that one is and leaves no space for what one is not. A bespoke suit that no-one but you has the skill to create.

We must detach ourselves from ill-fitting finery and emerge naked into the expansive plain of our consciousness. We emerge shivering, insecure, a lonely stranger in a realm of chaotic possibility. We have no guide but the demands of necessity; the path is steep, the way narrow, the only option to learn through failure. The child awakening alone in the forest cannot but learn how to hunt, but threat lurks idly in every shadow, the hollow reassurance of illusion offering to subsume us.

We must learn the intricacies of this explosive world. We must learn anew what we mean to ourselves, before we can mean to others. We must embrace the loneliness and offer it up as a sacrifice, learning over time a true Self that defies loneliness, for true loneliness is alienation from one's Self; hollow costume offers only superficial

warmth, the icy wind of neglected consciousness worrying the edges of poorly-maintained seams. We must stride through the landscape of consciousness, learning anew how to craft and order oneself: the lonely Artist, learning what it is to Be.

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