

Book Review

Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature, by Alva Nöe. New York: Hill and Wang, 2015. Pp. xiii + 285.

Like all of his work, Alva Nöe's latest book *Strange Tools* is written with passion and intelligence. It is fresh and incisive, and defends the fascinating idea that art and philosophy play similar rôles in our lives. According to Nöe, they are both essentially reflective or critical activities. Each of the arts reflects on, 'displays', and 'investigates', a distinctive human activity, such as story-telling, dancing, or picture-making, in roughly the way that philosophy, as Nöe sees it, reflects on science.

This is a doubly unorthodox position. It combines an unorthodox view about the arts with an unorthodox view about philosophy.

First, regarding the arts, the orthodox view is that epic poetry *is* a kind of story-telling, ballet *is* a kind of dance, and painting *is* a kind of picture-making. The artistic activity may be especially preoccupied with, and therefore especially sensitive to, the aesthetic potential of its medium, perhaps even to the point where its original practical function is neglected or set aside. But although the *Iliad* is a different *kind* of narrative from a military dispatch, it is still a narrative; and although Balanchine's *Serenade* is a different kind of dance from the All Blacks' Haka, it is still a dance.

Nöe rejects this traditional conception of the arts. He distinguishes between two levels of thought and activity:

Level 1 is the level of the organized activity or the technology. Level 2 is the level where the nature of the organization at the lower level gets put on display and investigated. At level 1, we have activities like talking, moving, dancing, making pictures, singing, etc. ... Correspondingly, at level 2, we have the different arts: poetry and fiction, choreography, painting and photography, music, and so on. Level-2 practices play with and reshape level-1 activities. (p. 29f)

For example,

When a choreographer stages a dance, he is representing dancing. That is, he puts dancing itself on display. Choreography shows us dancing, and so, really, it displays us, we human beings, as dancers; choreography shows us dancing; choreography exhibits the place dancing has, or can have, in our lives. (p. 13)

Choreography [...] is not dancing, it is an engagement with dancing as a phenomenon. (p. 15)

Turning to philosophy, according to one traditional view, philosophy is the most fundamental, or alternatively the most general, part of science. For example, in Descartes' famous image, which appears in the preface to the *Principles of Philosophy*, the whole of science is like a tree: 'The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences'. In the twentieth century, Russell held that the propositions of logic are supremely general truths about the most pervasive features of reality, while Sellars made the vague but much-quoted claim that the aim of philosophy is 'to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term'.

Again, Nöe rejects this conception of philosophy. He prefers the view that philosophy is a critical or reflective activity. This is not as radical a departure from tradition as Nöe's conception of the arts. In modern philosophy, Kant is its pre-eminent exponent, although Nöe's version of it owes more to Wittgenstein.

'Philosophy', Nöe insists, 'is not just "more science"' (p. 220). '[It] doesn't yield positive nuggets of information that you can take away and put to work in this or that area of your life, the way physics, mathematics, or economics does' (p. 115). He quotes Wittgenstein's remark in the *Tractatus*: 'The word "philosophy" must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences' (4.111).

Putting these ideas about the arts and philosophy together, Nöe's view is that they are similar kinds of activity:

Philosophy stands to ... reasoning, argument, belief formation, and, crucially, the work of science in the same kind of relation that, say, choreography stands to movement and dancing, or painting as an art stands to picture-making activities as these flourish in our lives. (p. 29f)

Both philosophy and choreography aim at ... a kind of understanding that, in Wittgenstein's phrase, consists in having a perspicuous representation —but they do it, so to speak, in different neighborhoods of our existence. (p. 17)

I have some sympathy both with Nöe's conception of the arts, and with his conception of philosophy. I shall comment on them in turn.

First, regarding art, the distinction between level 1 activities and level 2 activities does not seem to me helpful, and to be fair, Nöe himself expresses some unease about it. He says that 'the idea that choreography is metadancing, or that art practices are, as I have been suggesting, metalevel, is too simple' (p. 30). Whatever else figurative painters do, they certainly make pictures; and whatever else Homer did, he did tell stories. So the idea that their work reflects on picture-making without being picture-making, or reflects on narrative without being narrative, cannot be right.

But Nöe *is* right to suggest that artists, at least the artists who shape the artistic traditions to which they belong, are bound to reflect critically on the

medium in which they work, and often challenge established ideas about its potentialities and limitations. And this is not an accidental feature of the arts.

Every work of art communicates thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in a specific medium, with specific materials and techniques. And its interest and value as a work of art always depend on its sensitivity to the communicative possibilities of the medium—of the materials and techniques that it employs. So the practice of making art, at least when it is imaginative to some degree, necessarily involves reflecting on the nature of the medium, and on its expressive potential. This isn't just a feature of the subversive art of the twentieth century, it is a feature of art in every tradition, because it is part of what makes a practice of making pictures, or narratives, or dances, count as art.

(This reflective or reflexive nature is one important difference between art and science. For example, physics in the seventeenth century *was* simultaneously engaged in searching for the laws of motion and in searching for the right way to search for the laws of motion. But this isn't an essential and universal part of physics: physics since the eighteenth century hasn't had this dual nature.)

Nöe is so concerned to underline the importance of this aspect of art that he sometimes suggests that the whole purpose and meaning of art consists in this reflective and critical attitude to the artistic medium. 'A work of art', he says, using a phrase that gives the book its title, 'is a strange tool; it is an implement or instrument that has been denuded of its function. Art is the enemy of function, it is the perversion of technology. This is why architecture has a problematic standing among the arts' (p. 98).

This is surely an exaggeration. First, every, or almost every, work of art has a communicative function, and many works of art have other functions as well. So art is not an enemy of function, in any plausible sense of the phrase. Second, it is true that there is nothing intrinsic about buildings that makes them works of art. (If the Vikings had done aesthetics, architecture would not have been included in their conception of the arts, but shipbuilding would.) But there have been times in the history of every civilization when buildings have been the most important artefacts that express values in a sensuous and symbolic form, and when painting and sculpture have been subordinated to architecture. So a theory of art that implies that architecture has a problematic standing among the arts is a problematic theory of art.

However, despite the exaggeration, works of art *are* strange tools, because they combine a communicative function with a peculiar absorption in the medium in which they communicate. The most poignant image of this absorption, of its profound and disturbing power, is Shakespeare's image of the dyer's hand:

[...] my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand:
Pity me, then, and wish I were renewed.

Turning to philosophy, again I agree partly with Nöe's view. That is, I agree that philosophy is not the most fundamental or the most general part of science. And I agree that philosophy is a reflective and critical discipline. But unlike Nöe, I do not want to deny that philosophy is an integral part of natural science, just as I do not want to deny that painting *is* picture-making, and epic poetry *is* narrative.

Nöe contrasts philosophy on the one hand with physics and mathematics on the other. As mentioned above, he says: 'Philosophy is not just "more science"'. '[It] doesn't yield positive nuggets of information that you can take away and put to work in this or that area of your life, the way physics, mathematics, or economics does'. I think this is a mistake. In fact one good way to understand the place of philosophy in science is to compare philosophy and mathematics.

Is mathematics part of science? It is not hard to understand the reasons for saying no. Mathematical theorems are not proved or disproved in the way that scientific theories are confirmed or disconfirmed, by conducting experiments and making observations—with telescopes, microscopes, spectrosopes, or the naked eye. Besides, mathematics is as deeply involved in other aspects of our lives as it is in science—in finance and gambling, for example.

Nevertheless, there is an obvious sense in which mathematics is an indispensable part of science. Modern science is unimaginable without mathematics. Physical theories are formulated in mathematical terms, and the observations that confirm or disconfirm them are expressed in numbers. And mathematics is also part of science in a more general, cultural sense, because it is pursued for the sake of enlarging knowledge and understanding, independently of the ways in which it can be used to solve practical problems.

However, the distinctive rôle mathematics plays in science has not always been properly understood. For example, it is a mistake to conceive of geometry, as Descartes did, as the most general science of matter, or to believe, as Kant did, that geometry and arithmetic are a priori bodies of knowledge about space and time. Mathematics is not one of the special sciences; it is not the most fundamental science; and it is not the most general science. Its special task is to explore, extend, codify, and correct all of our thinking and reasoning about quantities and magnitudes. So it permeates every part of science where this kind of thinking and reasoning occur, which today means every part of science. *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* may be the last scientific masterpieces which do not include any mathematical reasoning or mathematical ideas.

In my view, the relationship between science and philosophy is similar to the relationship between science and mathematics. Mathematics is and always has been largely constructive, whereas philosophy is and always has been largely analytical and critical. In other words, philosophy aims on the whole to understand, criticize, and reform existing systems of concepts rather than to devise new ones. But like mathematics, philosophy is an a priori discipline. And like

mathematics, philosophy has made an indispensable contribution to the development and revision of scientific ideas. For example, Special Relativity is just as dependent on Einstein's revolutionary analysis of the concept of simultaneity as it is on nineteenth century developments in geometry. Self-conscious philosophy, deliberately focused on the analysis and criticism of concepts, probably began with ethical and religious concepts. But wherever it begins, it is bound to ramify through our intellectual lives, and scientific concepts—together with ethical, logical, and psychological concepts—have been at the heart of philosophy throughout the modern period.

So, returning to Nöe's distinction between level-1 and level-2 activities, does philosophy belong to level 2? Is it about concepts rather than the phenomena we use concepts to think about? The answer is that this is a false opposition. This is more obvious in the case of ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy, because human behaviour is partly guided, and societies and institutions and the arts are therefore partly shaped, by ethical, political, and aesthetic ideas. But it is also true of the philosophy that is concerned with concepts used in natural science. Understanding the phenomena—science, in the broadest sense of the word—is a complex achievement, which depends on a number of different activities: devising theories, testing them experimentally, inventing and making scientific instruments, devising the mathematical and computational techniques which are used to develop theories and interpret experimental data, and inventing the new concepts and understanding the existing concepts in which theoretical ideas are expressed.

In conclusion, art and philosophy are *quite* strange. They are essentially reflective and critical activities, in a way, or to a degree, that the rest of science is not. But I do not believe that either art or philosophy is quite as strange as Nöe thinks they are, or quite as similar.

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doi:10.1093/mind/fzw060