Revealing the Truth of Art

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Philosophical discussion of art in English tends not to aim its sights particularly high, and some Anglo-Saxon philosophy has effectively denied art any serious philosophical significance at all. In this light a contemporary German book* which wishes to argue for the truth of art over that of the natural sciences might appear as a typical piece of German woolliness, or as a regression to Romantic hyperbole. Neither view would, however, be valid; hence my extended attention to the book here. In a philosophical history of German aesthetics from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, via Schiller, Schelling, Novalis, Schlegel, Solger, to Tieck, Manfred Frank, professor of philosophy in Tübingen and author of major works on, among other topics, hermeneutics and post-structuralism, reveals the importance of the history of aesthetics for contemporary philosophy as a whole in ways often unfamiliar in the English-speaking world. Frank's arguments make a vital contribution to the re-orientation in philosophy today that has been apparent in the growth of interest in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, and their successors.

Frank's introduction to early-Romantic aesthetics challenges the kind of analytical aesthetics which sees the philosophy of art as just concerned with the clarification of statements about art. The hermeneutic tradition to which Frank belongs regards such an analytical approach as a secondary – and questionable – enterprise, in that a philosophy of art which has renounced engagement with the problem of what art *is*, and which has no concern with the fact that its own condition of possibility is the existence of art, may have little claim to the title of philosophy at all. This does not, however, mean that Frank ignores the language of aesthetic judgements, which is the central concern of analytical philosophy of art. He makes it clear from the outset that Kant's discovery of the relationship between the structure of the object and the form of judgement, and thus of propositions, is of vital importance to the question of aesthetics.

For Frank it is the break, central to Kant's re-orientation of epistemology, with the model of truth as *adequatio*, as an – inferior – mental re-presentation of a preceding ideal presence of the object, which opens up the space for the modern revaluation of the philosophical significance of art in the new discipline of aesthetics, *as well as* for the modern realisation of the importance of language for philosophy. The link between these two aspects is crucial, because it goes to the root of modern conceptions of truth. The central issue in Kant is the activity of synthesis by the subject, both in the propositional articulation of judgements and in the constitution of objects of knowledge from sensuous data. Though Kant does sometimes talk of truth as *adequatio*, in his account of the 'imagination' (*Vorstellungskraft*), he is clear about the *active* nature of the subject in the production of knowledge – a conception which is ultimately incompatible with the notion of knowledge as representation:

> If objects only come about at all via synthetic acts of the understanding, the understanding cannot be made into the imitator of objects (p. 175).

Frank connects this to Heidegger's demonstration that the propositional articulation of a world as a totality of 'facts' has as its prior condition the opening up of a world as that which can be understood at all. This opening is an act of *poiesis*, and it is only in the context of its having already taken place that propositional truth within a collectively agreed science is possible.

In this view Paul Klee's dictum that 'Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible', which Frank takes as the motto for much of his investigation, is not just a statement about art, but about truth. For Heidegger what is articulated as knowledge in a scientific proposition will depend on the prior disclosure of the world as that of which truth can be said. The form of this disclosure is seeing something as something, which is the condition of possibility of the truth or falsity of a proposition, and creates the possibility of pretence or lying. As Heidegger shows in *The Basic Concepts of Metaphysics*, to see *a* and *b* means that we must have already pre-theoretically established a relationship between *a* and *b*; we must have already grasped some of the multiplicity we are confronted with as something. The existential structure of 'seeing-as' is prior to any specific cognitive act: '*what philosophy concerns itself with reveals itself at all only in and from a transformation of human existence.*' Philosophical *knowledge* is not, therefore, the grasping of pre-existing essences, but rather the 'comprehending opening-up (*Aufschliessen*) of something in a determinately directed questioning'.[1] Being always already *is*; knowledge has to come into Being. Frank suggests how this links to Romantic aesthetics. The relationship of *a* and *b* involves a productive act – nothing in *a* and *b* themselves will produce it. As such, the constitution of the world as articulable in propositional form is inseparable from the questions posed by aesthetics for philosophy as a whole, if aesthetics is seen as concerned with the way the world is disclosed as something to be understood.

The contrast between the transcience of scientific claims to truth and the survival of great works of art underlies this conception. The truth of a scientific proposition, which identifies an object via its difference from other objects, in propositional form, illuminates this particular object of science within an interpretative horizon which the science cannot constitute in its own terms.

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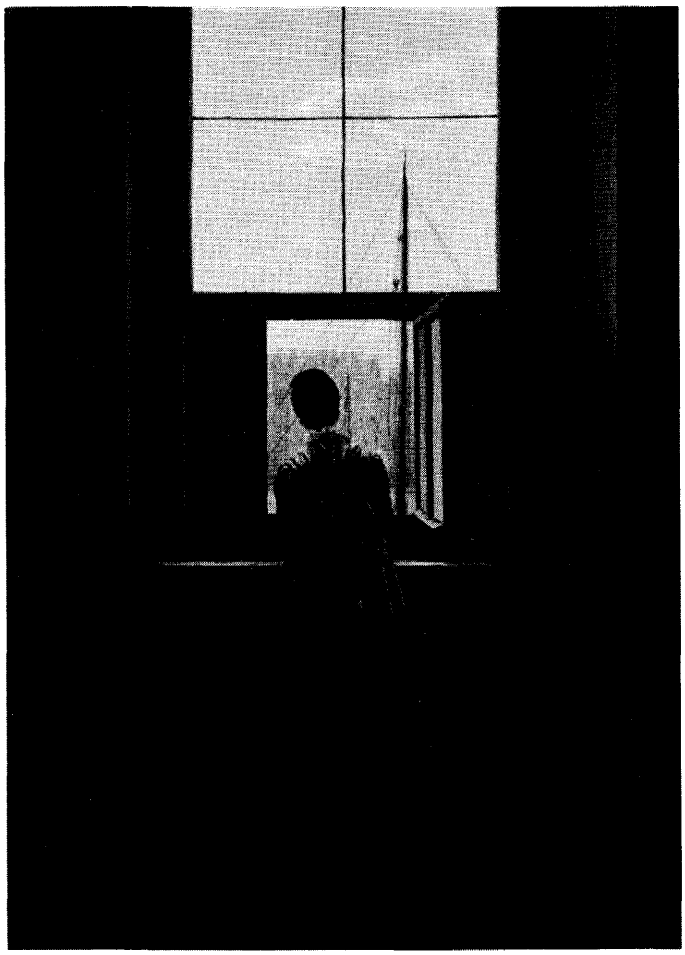
* Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die* frühromantische *Ästhetik*, edition Suhrkamp 1563, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1989, 466pp., DM 24 pb, 3 518 11563 4 pb

This does not mean that scientific propositions cannot be true, just that they are articulated within this horizon. The horizon, as history shows, does not remain the same: asserting scientific truth, then, is not re-presenting true objects. Art also, according to Frank, constitutes a form of truth which, like modern propositional conceptions of truth, does not rely on adequation or representation. The two kinds of truth are evidently different. What sort of truth is it in the case of art?

Frank's book may surprise with its assertion of the truth of art, though related conceptions have become more familiar since Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, entered discussion in the English-speaking world. The validity of Frank's assertion rests upon the demonstration that conceptual thinking which is articulated in propositional form is dependent on a more fundamental disclosure, of the kind which is most evident in modernity in the form of art. Art in modernity is seen by Frank as making things visible in ways which would otherwise be hidden from the view of a philosophy increasingly fixated upon the natural sciences.

Two evident objections to Frank's proposition are (1) that there is no consensus about beauty, let alone about what counts as art, and (2) that art is conceptually indeterminate and, as such, has no claim to truth value at all. The first objection presupposes that there *are* more emphatic forms of necessary agreement available to the sciences. Frank disputes this with reference to one of his main philosophical precursors: 'For Schleiermacher the aesthetic situation has simply become epistemically general' (p. 69) – *all* judgements, of knowledge, ethics, and beauty have to be *produced* in the praxis of intersubjective communication, the telos of which lies in the attempt to reach a universal, non-coercive consensus. Clearly his view is close here to that of Habermas, despite



Casper David Friedrich, Frau am Fenster, 1822

significant differences elsewhere. The very nature of judgement thus entails an ethical imperative. In modernity there is no longer an Archimedean point that philosophy could occupy in order to furnish absolute cognitive certainty. There can be no such certainty that would not have to be arrived at in the process of communication, a process which entails the irreducible individuality of the partners in communication. The aim of scientific cognition is the elimination of this individuality, but this, as Schleiermacher makes clear, is a regulative idea, involving an endless task.

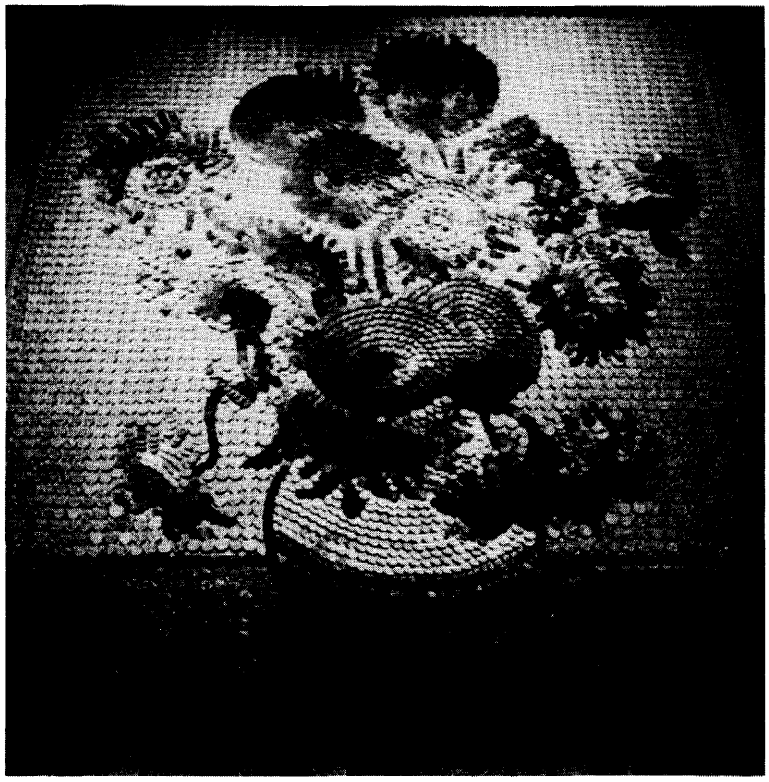
Frank's position does not, though, entail the kind of abandoning of philosophy and truth familiar in the work of Richard Rorty. For Frank, as for the Romantics, the very impetus of philosophy derives from an absolute which cannot be *known*, if knowledge is conceived of as the synthesising of intuitions by the understanding. It is precisely the limitations of scientific knowledge which lead to the demand for a medium where those limitations give way to some sense of what draws us beyond them. The inexhaustibility of the interpretation of the work of art becomes an image of the 'longing for the infinite', in Schlegel's phrase, which is not a Romantic cliché, but a serious philosophical notion. Instead of art being merely a lower form of truth, as it is for Hegel, who thinks that philosophy itself reveals the infinite within the finite, thereby incorporating the truth of the understanding and of art and religion into itself, the ab-solute in Romantic aesthetics is absolved from any possibility of being reflexively known and can only be indirectly revealed in art. Because the results of free acts of the imagination cannot be finally interpreted they point to a potential infinity of sense in a way that products of the understanding do not.

If this seems merely speculative or mystical, one only needs to consider the failure of natural science to give an account of music – the non-representational medium par excellence – that makes any sense of it as music, rather than as sound waves, frequencies, etc. A scientific account of music, or any other form of art, analyses conceptually identifiable sensuous phenomena. An aesthetic account is concerned with what cannot be thus analysed, because it cannot be derived from what the phenomena have in common with other such phenomena, but only from what the particular phenomena mean. This entails creative initiatives on the part of the recipients of art. Art involves, in Novalis's phrase, an 'aesthetic imperative' if it is to be constituted as art. This imperative requires free subjects, who may or may not follow the imperative. If it *is* the case that the products of science and of art spring from a common source – the productive imagination – it is less absurd than it might at first seem to think that the products of freedom have a higher status than the products that deal with necessity and limitation. In the latter the object is constituted via an unconscious objective necessity in the subject, in the former by free consciousness. The access to new aspects of that realm of necessity, of course, is itself dependent upon the creative initiative of the scientist, which requires the structure of seeing-as that was analysed above.

The crucial philosophical task for Frank is to understand the nature of self-consciousness, a task in which aesthetics must play a central role. Self-consciousness has been the key issue in his work on such varied topics as time in German Romanticism, Schelling's Hegel-critique, Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, post-structuralism (see *What is Neo-Structuralism?*, Minnesota University Press), and the question of individuality. In all these works Frank is able to show how inadequate reflection upon the question of self-consciousness has led to a creeping scientism and objectivism, even in areas, like deconstruction, where one might least expect it. Though Frank evidently does not think there can be thought without language, he does wish to re-examine the dominant assumption, in both analytical and most recent Continental

traditions, that the real task of philosophy lies wholly in its approach to language. Analytical philosophy has tended, putting it somewhat parodically, to reduce the understanding of self-consciousness to the ability of the subject to use the term 'I' correctly; post-structuralism sees subjectivity as always already subverted by its location in language; and Habermas sees intersubjective communication as having taken over from reflection on self-consciousness as the main paradigm of modern philosophy.

These positions, though, fail to see that there is a different way of thinking about subjectivity, which does not implicitly or explicitly reduce it to its reflection in the signifier, and which therefore sustains an active role for the subject. Frank shows that reflection does not give a way of understanding self-consciousness: how do we know *ourself* by reflection of the *other* in language, if we do not have some other already existing familiarity with ourself? This familiarity cannot take the form of general conceptual knowledge, as the subject which knows has to use itself to know itself. The identity of knower and known that is the condition of possibility of the undeniable fact of self-consciousness must therefore depend upon a ground which cannot appear in the reflexive split of knower and known. Even Hegel's notion of self-recognition in the other, which Habermas turns into an argument about intersubjective communication, needs a criterion which enables me to see *myself*. The ground of this ability is, therefore, unavailable to conceptual knowledge. Why, then, make it the absolute basis of philosophy, as the thinkers in the early Romantic tradition do? 'Because' – this is Schelling's answer – 'without pre-supposing it the relativity of our knowledge would remain inexplicable' (p. 157).



Rose Finn-Kelcey, Bureau de Change, 1987. Installation

For the Romantics access to that ground of self-consciousness lies in art. It is in the sense that the articulated scraping of horse hair on cat gut strung over a resonating box, within the framework of a system of musical practice and potential, has more claims on our attention than the physics of 1826, that we can become aware that Beethoven's late quartets may have a claim to truth which natural science has not. The quartets 'show more than can be grasped by the conceptual labour of interpretation' (p. 174). Unless we are to return to a pre-Kantian position, objectivity can only be constituted by the compelling aspects of the way the world presents itself to us as active intelligent beings, not as the truth of the world in itself. Once philosophy pays attention to the living activity of consciousness, it must face the consequences of a view of language which inherently resists being fixed. (Frank shows here how many of the aspects of post-structuralism which have been so influential in recent years can be given a more convincing philosophical grounding, and have a much longer history than is often seen.) The ways of making the world comprehensible that are the horizon of established linguistic and scientific communities will always tend to conceal the infinite potential for articulation in living language. The unsaid is always more than the said.

It is, in this perspective, no coincidence that in the period being considered by Frank the notion of music as a higher language than conceptual language becomes a philosophical issue.[2] The inaccessibility of the absolute to reflexive thinking leads to the attribution of philosophical significance to a non-representational medium; and, in Schleiermacher in particular, to a realisation of the role of music, as rhythm, in language. In a related manner, it leads also to the turn to irony. Any positive philosophical articulation of the absolute would have to lay claim to the Archimedean vantage-point that the inherent limitations of knowledge reveal as inaccessible: as such, for the Romantics, any positive statement must ironically negate itself even as it is made. This does not, though, lead to mere incoherence. As Schlegel says: 'If the absolute truth were found, then the task of spirit would be completed and it would have to cease to be, as it only exists in activity' (cited p. 228). It leads, then, as Frank puts it, to:

> the programme of Hegelianism without a crowning conclusion ... If there were no orientation towards a One which was not relative, when the various interpretations of it which have appeared in history could not come into contradiction with each other and thus also could not destroy each other (pp. 228-29).

Without the One there could be no dynamic dispute about knowledge of the kind in which the real history of *Wissenschaft* consists. There *is* such a dispute, though: the question is how it is to be understood. Much recent philosophy, most obviously the work of Jean-François Lyotard, has tried to abandon any sense that there is such a One, in favour of the idea that we must come to terms with irreconcilable differences between kinds of validity claims. As Frank shows, however, such a position cannot be sustained, as even to establish irreconcilable difference requires a disputed ground which must be the same for the notion of difference to be comprehensible.

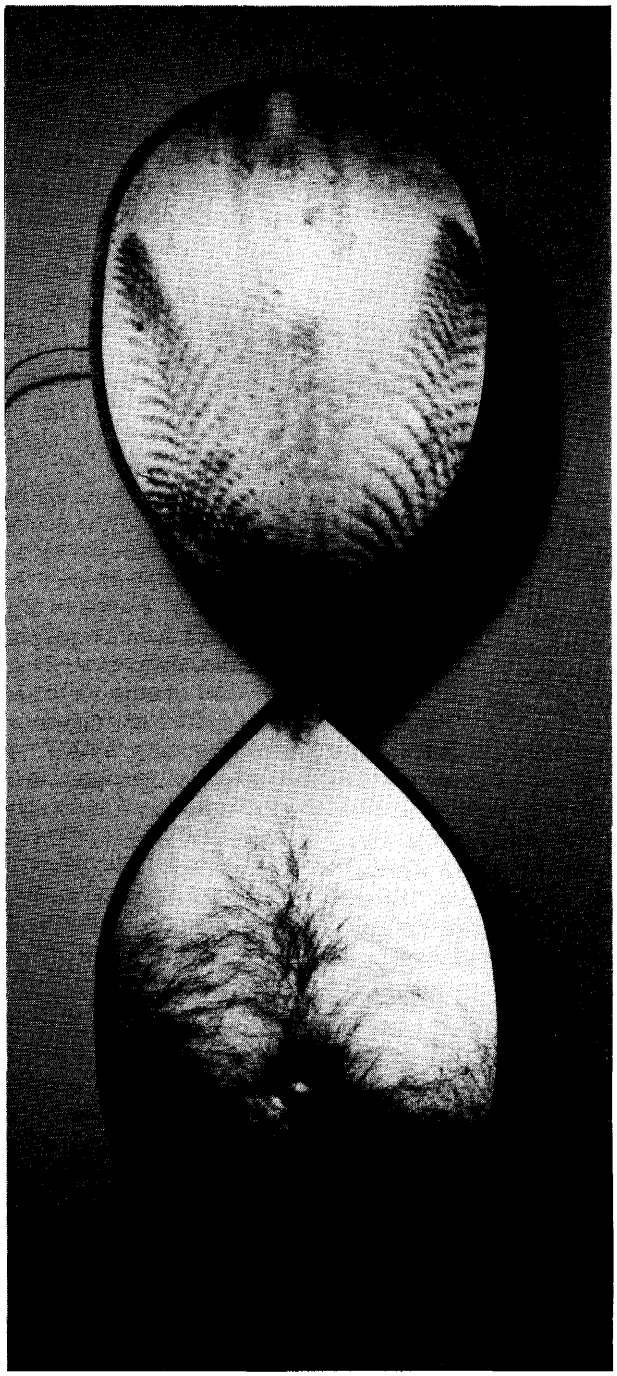
This One, 'Being', the absolute, cannot, however, as Hegel tried to show, be dissolved into the movement of reflection by its necessary going over into the other of itself; essence, knowledge, Being is, as the late Schelling puts it, *unvordenklich*, there before it can be thought, such that 'the beginning of thinking is not yet thinking', and thinking cannot return to itself as it does in Hegel's journey of *Geist*. Instead we are forced into modern temporality, where self-consciousness can never return to a ground it would *know* as its own. The truth of Romantic philosophy, Frank contends, was obliterated along with the breakdown of Hegel's attempt to demonstrate the ultimate presence of the absolute in thinking, thereby distorting our perspective on the philosophy of

modernity. The 'post-modern' world of fragments and difference is, therefore, philosophically more convincingly represented by the early Romantics, as the philosophers of *modernity* par excellence. The Romantics realise that the sense of our world can always only lie in the future, and it is the task of art to come to terms with this. Novalis: 'If the character of a given problem is its insolubility, then we solve it if we represent its insolubility' (cited p. 271). The perceived failure of art, as seen by philosophies critical of art, to give a positive representation of the truth, becomes what makes art reveal a deeper truth than the temporary solutions of the sciences.

Because they begin from such a different conception of the history of modern philosophy, Frank's arguments about Romantic aesthetics can shed new light for English-speaking readers on the increasingly arid debate about relativism. Given the changing character of knowledge, the temptation is to see all knowledge as contextually relative, giving rise to the standard objection that the *knowledge* of contextual relativity cannot itself be contextually relative. However, the opponents of relativism, let alone its defenders, rarely examine the idea of the absolute which is the necessary condition of any argument about relativism. Richard Bernstein, for instance, claims that 'Absolutism ... is no longer a live option'.[3] Without an absolute, though, the term 'relativism' is meaningless. This does not mean they are opposites. In the terms outlined so far, relativism involves 'reflection': each moment of *knowledge* is dependent upon what it is not, upon relations between beings. The absolute cannot be dependent, and cannot be characterised by reflection.

In Frank's terms, the choice in the philosophy of modernity is really between Hegel and the Romantics. In Hegel the relativity of the knowledge produced by the understanding, where each thing becomes known via what it is not, is overcome when the totality of the relations of knowledge abolishes itself in the absolute, in the realisation that the whole process is the truth. *Everything* is relative to everything else: the self-negation of each particular thing, which results from its failure to be complete in itself, is overcome in the articulation of an absolute interdependence, which ultimately entails the identity of thought and being. For the Romantics this revelation of ultimate identity cannot positively result from the demonstration of the relativity of all particular beings. The absolute for them is the necessary ground of the relativity of knowledge, but cannot be *known* as such, because the very structure of knowledge depends upon the relation of knower and known, upon a separation on the basis of the one Being which is prior to this separation and is the condition of its possibility.

The awareness of the necessity of this absolute foundation for philosophy leads to the sense in which art, because it forces us into infinite interpretation, may be a more adequate way of understanding the absolute than philosophy. At this level the debate between relativism and objectivism has to be seen as part of a larger issue. Art's very use of finite materials to show something which is *not* those materials is a key to the nature of modern self-consciousness, for which the sense of the lack of any positive absolute is fundamental. Rembrandt's self-portraits are not art because of the pigments and canvas used; indeed, nor are they art because they represent Rembrandt. The truth they articulate cannot ever be fully said, and happens in productive engagement with the work, which must move beyond the work's sensuous materials to its meanings. Frank shows the implications of this most effectively in a discussion of Solger's remarks, in his account of irony, on the irreducibility of being to consciousness, which is worth citing at length.



Helen Chadwick, The Philosopher's Fear of Flesh, 1989

> Being as 'in itself completely One' can for precisely this reason never be known in its essence, because it, as it were, never leaves a gap or a split through which consciousness could penetrate to it [Solger]. It is different with consciousness: as it in part becomes an other to itself it admittedly grasps itself, but only *is* to the extent to which it grasps itself. Its being is relative to knowing; it is only conditionally (*bedingterweise*) real. For just this reason it is temporal; for being temporal means precisely having its being not in itself but in an other; and that in turn means: never existing 'all at once', but in different moments. Consciousness, which is primordially deprived of being, projects itself into its future as a being which will be reached there; but being flees again into the future and draws a new (one is tempted to say with Heidegger) project of existence (*Daseins-Entwurf*) after it, and so on (p. 325).

The importance of the question of relativism for Romanticism lies, then, not in the facile opposition of relativism and objectivism as ways of considering particular sciences, but rather in its revealing essential aspects of our self-conscious life in modernity. This approach to philosophy may turn out to be more fruitful than the concentration upon one narrow sector of epistemology which generally underlies the existing debate over relativism.

Objectivists who set out to establish the incontrovertible certainty of scientific knowledge, based however sophisticatedly on the idea of an objective true world, seem still to think that those who have embarked on their quest can avoid the necessity of reflecting upon themselves, who are, after all, the necessary correlate of any object. How can one have the notion of an objective world, if it does not entail an other for which it is objective? Objectivists fail to see that the very notions of objectivity, or realism, however much they may now be couched in the language of propositions and singular terms, already locate them within a structure of reflection, of knower and known, and bring with them the kind of difficulties suggested above. The desire ultimately to ground scientific knowledge would entail direct access to an absolute which is the prior condition or the ultimate telos of reflexive knowledge: objectivism has to claim it *already* knows what knowledge is. One is tempted, therefore, to suggest that the only consistent course for objectivists is to be Hegelians, bizarre as this might sound. On the other hand, seen from the Romantic perspective, relativists who are aware of the reflexivity of knowledge tend, even as they are denying objectivity to knowledge, to invoke a disguised but necessarily *knowable* absolute, such as the will-to-power, ideology, the Western episteme, historical conjuncture, in order to validate the denial of objectivity by revealing the real ground of objectivity.

The Romantic position suggests a way beyond these bad alternatives – I am aware, of course, that the complexities of this issue are far greater than I have made them. The Romantic absolute is a reminder of our inherent fallibility, but it also sustains the reasons for believing there can be value in our dividedness, a reason for the rigorous and coherent pursuit of knowledge in the widest sense. The experience of art, in which it is not the piece of painted canvas, the fleeting vibrations of the atmosphere, the words of the poem, but the fact that it is what they are not that is *significant*, points for Frank to the

> speculative state of affairs which can be clearly formulated in words: that there can be no intuition (*Anschauung*) of the Highest, but that it does not simply mean for this reason that (as complacent common-sense would like impatiently to conclude) it does not exist at all. It exists as that which, in the divisions and fragmentations in our world of the understanding, yet creates that unity, *without which contradiction and difference could not be shown as such* (p. 340) (My emphasis).

This speculative fact points also to the precarious but necessary unity of ourselves as self-conscious beings, which we cannot conceptually explain, but without which such fundamental experiences as loss, difference, temporality, ignorance become inexplicable. To the psychoanalytical mind this unity may sound like a wish for regression to the imaginary, where the pain of division is repressed in the refusal to acknowledge the reality of the other. However, such a view fails to grasp the philosophical significance of the aesthetic, which is that it seeks ways of understanding the fact of the unity which is the necessary condition of all divisions. This does not deny those divisions, but insists that they can only be significant if we have some access to unity. The importance of Frank's work lies in the way he has shown, in opposition to most contemporary philosophy, that it is in the question of self-consciousness that our approaches to these issues should be sought.

I have so far given a very positive account of Frank's position, mainly because I find much of it convincing. It is clear to me, however, that, despite its persuasiveness, Frank's position must make us feel uneasy. The sense that contemporary artistic production is far from such high-flown conceptions is hard to escape, and Frank himself rarely uses contemporary art as an example. The gap between what his philosophy says about the significance of art and what contemporary art seems to mean in present-day society is considerable and cannot be ignored. We need a more developed response to the question as to why most contemporary art seems increasingly distant from what philosophy can articulate about the significance of art. The temptation of a disillusioned Hegelianism, in which great art is coming to an end, not because the absolute can be articulated better in philosophy, but because what the sciences can do is both rigorous and effective in a way philosophy no longer is, and more important than the merely imaginary realm of art, cannot be lightly dismissed. At one level Hegel himself was maintaining that art in modernity does not have, as it may have done in Athens, the power to constitute the basis of a polity; and it would be hard to make a serious claim that it could. If art is the locus of revelation of new meaning, then we need to have more convincing ways of suggesting that it can really still open up new aspects of the major issues of our time. The need to engage again with Adorno is evident here.

There are two approaches to understanding this issue which point to the basic choice in contemporary aesthetics, and, indeed, to basic choices in contemporary philosophy. One approach is to accept the relative insignificance of art, and to clarify what significance aesthetics judgements still might have, as opposed to scientific and legal or ethical judgements. Whilst not denying the importance of this first alternative in some contexts, the other approach is to suggest that the apparent relative insignificance of art is in fact the sign of a deep malaise, in which our very conceptions of truth are implicated, and those effects are visible, for example, in the ecological crisis and the destruction of the diversity of cultures by the success of Western capitalism.

The problem with the idea of such a malaise lies in its vagueness. A sense of this malaise is evidently at the root of the increased attention paid in recent years to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, and post-structuralism. It is clear, though, that we need to do far more work to understand the relationships between the conceptions of truth at issue here. Is the root of the malaise 'Western metaphysics', 'instrumental reason', 'truth' itself? The common target seems to be an objectifying, scientistic approach to questions of truth. The debate concerning the relationship between truth as disclosure and truth as the assertion of what is the case has not, though, really begun in most areas of English-speaking philosophy, despite the fact that its implications are at the root of most confrontations between analytical and Continental philosophers, as well as between post-structuralists and their opponents. Frank has done vital work in demonstrating the importance of this issue and in providing access to conceptual resources which have tended to be forgotten. In Frank's perspective the post-modern abandonment of any emphatic sense of truth, in the name of the avoidance of metaphysical closure, can itself turn into a worse kind of closure, in that it removes any serious sense as to why the issues demand our attention at all. The mere proliferation of difference can quickly lead to a sense that meaning is really indifferent, rather than to a deepening of the possibilities of meaning. Frank's position leaves open the hope that the individual meanings articulated in art may yet give us ways of seeing possibilities for truth which much of the dominant Western philosophical tradition has tended to obscure. The continued existence of such possibilities may be the best we can hope for.

Notes

1 Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, Frankfurt am Main, 1983, p. 423.

2 See my *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester University Press, 1990) on this topic, as well as on other issues in this essay.

3 Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Oxford, 1983, p. 12.